

## Editors' Introduction

In the wake of the leaking of thousands of secret US government diplomatic cables by the online activist organization Wikileaks, US senator Joe Lieberman urged the Obama administration “both on its own and in cooperation with other responsible governments around the world—to use all legal means necessary to shut down Wikileaks before it can do more damage by releasing additional cables. Wikileaks’ activities represent a shared threat to collective international security.”<sup>1</sup> The threat posed to the US government’s overt and covert foreign policy operations by the “Cablegate” leaks unleashed a series of international shock waves. Cited as being a catalyst for the Arab Spring, which began with the Tunisian revolution in 2010, to prompting an intensification in the battle for control of cyberspace, the events set in motion by Cablegate continue to unfold on a global scale.

As the political impact of the shared online distribution of secret government communiqués illustrates, we are now in the midst of a dramatic cultural and political change. Digital culture in the form of personal communication devices, online social networking sites, instant mass messaging, and numerous other digital media forms is reshaping the way we communicate and interact with one another. As the modern industrial era reshaped the nature of human and political subjectivity, the digital information era is reshaping communication and social relations across multiple platforms. While positivist ideas of the liberating potential of communications technology tend to pervade mainstream discourse, a closer examination of the digital’s impact on the structure of power is warranted, particularly in relation to labor, state control, and social movements. While Cablegate precipitated a wave of political responses, including attempts at censorship and calls for greater control of online security,<sup>2</sup> the structure and exercise of political power, while perhaps temporarily challenged, remains arguably unchanged. What the Cablegate leaks do highlight,

*Radical History Review*

Issue 117 (Fall 2013) DOI 10.1215/01636545-2210413

© 2013 by MARHO: The Radical Historians’ Organization, Inc.

however, is that access to the control of information is restructuring how we view ourselves in relation to the social and political and rewiring where, how, and with whom we engage in political action.

This issue of *Radical History Review* brings together a number of scholars, activists, and artists to examine the impact of digital culture on political life at the local, national, and transnational levels. While the proliferation of digital culture is a relatively recent phenomenon, its use as a tool for collective action, or to disrupt the functional apparatus of power structures, builds upon older modes of communication and technology. Issue coeditors Lyell Davies and Elena Razlogova, in their essay contextualizing the expansion of digital culture, provide a historical and analytical background for the articles included in this special issue. By examining historical methodologies for studying the very recent past, they trace the history of digital culture and the Internet, exploring the interaction between information and communication technologies and global social movements, the problem of digital labor, the rise of open-source software and open-access scholarship, and the key issues arising from the digitization of historical archives.

In the first of our feature articles, Marco Deseriis examines how digital communication informs subversion, comparing the industrial machine breaking of the Luddites and the activities of the contemporary hacker network Anonymous. Deseriis highlights features that are common to both movements, despite the differing historical contexts framing their activities. Both groups target machines: those saving labor in the case of the Luddites and those restricting access to information in that of Anonymous. Through industrial machine breaking and computer hacking, both groups reduce the productivity of labor and capital. Anonymous and Ned Ludd are also collective pseudonyms or “multiple-user names,” whose wide circulation in the public domain brings previously unrelated struggles into a common discursive space.

In an article that explores how the impact of the Cablegate leaks played out beyond its predominantly Western context, Lisa Lynch analyzes the online circulation of leaked US diplomatic cables relating to the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). She points out that while the media is constitutionally protected in the DRC, journalists face severe press restrictions and frequent reprisals. The result was a limited and cautious debate of the politically charged cables in the domestic press, while they were debated vigorously in that of the diaspora. Lynch highlights that despite political constraints, the ability of Congolese to access and discuss the Wikileaks cables is indicative of the Internet’s effects on the circulation of information.

Since the advent of the Internet and the development of social networking sites, the proliferation and circulation of online images has increased exponentially. Such images are central to *digilantism*: the practice of online humiliation of computer scammers, hackers, and pedophiles, for example. Dara N. Byrne’s article on

the rhetorical execution of justice and punishment on the digilante social network site 419eater.com examines the relationship between racialized crime and vigilante zeal. Focusing on Nigerian cybercrime and the deployment of racialized tropes pertaining to Africa, she illustrates how the racial framing of online criminality in the late 1990s uses the culture of antiblack vigilantism in the United States as its operational paradigm.

Images also constitute the focus of Stefka Hristova's comparative analysis of two Internet memes—the "Pepper Spray Cop" and "Doing a Lynndie." Here iconic images of traumatic events are appropriated, transformed, and retransformed by multiple participants for online dissemination. Such participatory manipulation recontextualizes events such as the torture of Iraqi detainees in Abu Ghraib prison and the pepper spraying of peaceful protesters during the Occupy movement at the University of California, Davis, highlighting the impact of digital culture on the processes of remembering and forgetting within popular culture.

The use of the Internet as a tool for the construction of communal identity and political organizing is explored in Tomomi Yamaguchi's article on the right-wing Action Conservative Movement (ACM) in Japan. Yamaguchi examines the employment of online spectacle by the ACM to disseminate nationalist and xenophobic propaganda, specifically through the performative staging of protests for online video streaming. In particular, she discusses how social networking has reshaped right-wing subjectivity in Japan and has come to blur boundaries between the public and private lives of those active in the ACM.

In our "Interviews" section for this issue, community organizers and media justice advocates Betty Yu (Center for Media Justice), Todd Wolfson (Media Mobilizing Project), and Rusita Avila (Media Literacy Project) discuss the meaning of "media justice" as it relates to low-income communities, people of color, immigrants, and other marginalized sectors in the United States. Yu, Wolfson, and Avila describe the challenges faced by the disenfranchised with regard to communication and media, arguing that the ability to access, generate, and share information is a basic human right.

In "Teaching Radical History," Ellen Noonan explores the development of the American Social History Project's work in history education and considers the possibilities inherent in a radically rethought history textbook. In discussing the *Who Built America?* textbook, she examines the potential for a new model of history learning that uses digital tools to foster literacy and historical thinking and deepen understanding of and inquiry into historical content.

The "Curated Spaces" section for this issue features the work of artist Wafaa Bilal, who uses interactive technologies, new media, and performance to create platforms for engagement and discussion. The featured projects interrogate digital culture as a platform for psychological and sociological control in the context of the war in Iraq and in an environment that is highly mediated and increasingly monitored.

In “(Re)Views,” Lyell Davies discusses Richard Maxwell and Toby Miller’s *Greening the Media*, which explores the impact of information communication technologies (ICTs) and consumer electronics (CEs) on the environment and on the lives of workers involved in their manufacture or disposal. The authors describe the environmental and human cost of mining and processing the raw materials needed to manufacture ICT/CE devices, the harsh labor conditions faced by those who actually make them, and the environmental crisis posed by the generation of e-waste as digital devices are rapidly made redundant through planned obsolescence.

Hossein Khosrowjahi’s review of Wael Ghonim’s *Revolution 2.0* and *Tweets from Tahrir*, edited by Nadia Idle and Alex Nunns, examines different accounts of the popular anti-Mubarak uprising in Egypt in January and February 2011. His review considers the ways that personal and national narratives of the Egyptian revolution have been constructed and explores how social media has informed activism in Egypt as an organizational tool and communication channel with the outside world.

“Radical Histories in Digital Culture” closes with historian Linda Gordon’s obituary for Gerda Lerner, the pioneering historian and founder of the field of women’s history, who passed away in January 2013.

—Lyell Davies, Conor McGrady, and Elena Razlogova

#### Notes

1. Quoted in Chris Amico, “Could Wikileaks Be Stopped,” *PBS NewsHour*, December 1, 2010, [www.pbs.org/newshour/rundown/2010/12/can-wikileaks-be-stopped.html](http://www.pbs.org/newshour/rundown/2010/12/can-wikileaks-be-stopped.html).
2. The Cybersecurity Act passed in the United States in 2012, for example.