

# Social Opposition in the Age of Internet: Desktop “Militants” and Public Intellectuals

By [Prof. James Petras](#)

Theme: [History](#), [Media Disinformation](#)

Global Research, November 20, 2011

20 November 2011

Invited paper to be read at the “Symposium on Re-Publicness”

Sponsored by the Chamber of Electrical Engineers

Ankara Turkey , December 9 – 10, 2011

Social Opposition in the Age of Internet: Desktop Intellectuals and Public Intellectuals

James Petras

Introduction

The relation of information technology (IT) and more specifically the internet, to politics is a central issue facing contemporary social movements. Like many previous scientific advances the IT innovations have a dual purpose: on the one hand, it has accelerated the global flow of capital, especially financial capital and facilitated imperialist ‘globalization’. On the other hand the internet has served to provide alternative critical sources of analysis as well as easy communication to mobilize popular movements.

The IT industry has created a new class of billionaires, from Silicon Valley in California to Bangalore , India . They have played a central role in the expansion of economic colonialism via their monopoly control in diverse spheres of information flows and entertainment.

To paraphrase Marx “the internet has become the opium of the people”. Young and old, employed and unemployed alike spend hours passively gazing at spectacles, pornography, video games, online consumerism and even “news” in isolation from other citizens, fellow workers and employees.

In many cases the “overflow” of “news” on the internet has saturated the internet, absorbing time and energy and diverting the ‘watchers’ from reflection and action. Just as too little and biased news by the mass media distorts popular consciousness, too many internet messages can immobilize citizen action.

The internet, deliberately or not, has “privatized” political life. Many otherwise potential activists have come to believe that circulating manifestos to other individuals is a political act, forgetting that only public action, including confrontations with their adversaries in public spaces, in city centers and in the countryside, is the basis of political transformations.

IT and Financial Capital

Let us remember that the original impetus for the growth of “IT” came from the demands of big financial institutions, investment banks and speculative traders who sought to move billions of dollars and euros with the touch of a finger from one country to another, from one enterprise to another, from one commodity to another.

Internet technology was the motor force for the growth of globalization at the service of financial capital. In some ways IT played a major role in precipitating the two global financial crises of the past decade (2001-2002, 2008-2009). The bubble in IT stocks of 2001 was a result of the speculative promotion of overvalued “software firms” de-linked from the ‘real economy’. The global financial crash of 2008-2009 and its continuation today, was induced by the computerized packaging of financial swindles and underfunded real estate mortgages. The ‘virtues’ of the internet, its rapid relay of information in the context of speculator capitalism turned out to be a major contributing factor to the worse capitalist crises since the Great Depression of the 1930’s.

### The Democratization of the Internet

The internet became accessible to the masses as a market for commercial enterprise and then spread to other social and political uses. Most importantly it became a means of informing the larger public of the exploitation and pillage of countries and people by multi-national banks. The internet exposed the lies which accompany US and EU imperialist wars in the Middle East and Southern Asia.

The internet has become contested terrain, a new form of class struggle, engaging national liberation and pro-democracy movements. The major movements and leaders from the armed fighters in the mountains of Afghanistan to the pro-democracy activists in Egypt, to the student movements in Chile and including the poor peoples’ housing movement in Turkey, rely on the internet to inform the world of their struggles, programs, state repression and popular victories. The internet links peoples’ struggles across national boundaries – it is a key weapon in creating a new internationalism to counter capitalist globalization and imperial wars.

To paraphrase Lenin, we could argue that 21st century socialism can be summed up by the equation: “soviets plus internet = participatory socialism”.

### The Internet and Class Politics

We should remember that computerized information techniques are not ‘neutral’ – their political impact depends on their users and overseers who determine who and what class interests they will serve. More generally the internet must be contextualized in terms of its insertion in public space.

Internet has served to mobilize thousands of workers in China and peasants in India against corporate exploiters and real estate developers. But computerized aerial warfare has become the NATO weapon of choice to bomb and destroy independent Libya. The US drones which send missiles that kill civilians in Pakistan, Yemen are directed by computer ‘intelligence’. The location of Colombian guerrillas and the deadly aerial bombings are computerized. In other words IT technology has dual uses: for popular liberation or imperial counter revolution.

### Neoliberalism and Public Space

The discussion of “public space” has frequently assumed that “public” means greater state intervention on behalf of the welfare of the majority; greater regulation of capitalism and increased protection of the environment. In other words benign “public” actors are counter posed to exploitative private market forces.

In the context of the rise of neo-liberal ideology and policies, many progressive writers argue about the “decline of the public sphere”. This argument overlooks the fact that the “public sphere” has increased its role in society, economy and politics on behalf of capital, especially financial capital and foreign investors. The “public sphere”, specifically the state is much more intrusive in civil society as a repressive force, particularly as neo-liberal policies increase inequalities. Because of the intensification and deepening of the financial crises, the public sphere (the state) has undertaken a massive role in bailing out bankrupt banks.

Because of large scale fiscal deficits provoked by capitalist class tax evasion, colonial war spending and public subsidies to big business, the public sphere (state) imposes class based “austerity” program cutting social expenditures and prejudicing public employees, pensioners, and private wage and salaried employees.

The public sphere diminished its role in the productive sector of the economy. However, the military sector has grown with expansion of colonial and imperial wars.

The basic issue underlying any discussion of the public sphere and the social opposition is not its decline or growth but rather the class interests which define the role of the public sphere. Under neo-liberalism, the public sphere is directed by the use of public treasury to finance bank bailouts, militarism and expanded police state intervention. A public sphere directed by the “social opposition” (workers, farmers, professionals, employees) would enlarge the scope of public sphere activity with regard to health, education, pensions, environment and employment.

The concept of the “public sphere” has two opposing faces (Janus-like): one facing capital and the military; the other labor/social opposition. The role of the internet is also subject to this duality: on the one hand the internet facilitates large scale movements of capital and rapid imperial military interventions; on the other hand it provides rapid flow of information to mobilize the social opposition. The basic question is what kind of information is transmitted to what political actors and for what social interest?

#### The Internet and the Social Opposition: The Threat of State Repression

For the social opposition the internet is first and foremost a vital source of alternative critical information to educate and mobilize the “public” - especially among progressive opinion-leaders, professionals, trade unionists and peasant leaders, militants and activists. The internet is the alternative to the capitalist mass media and its propaganda, a source of news and information that relays manifestos and informs activists of sites for public action. Because of the internet’s progressive role as an instrument of the social opposition it is subject to surveillance by the repressive police-state apparatus. For example, in the USA over 800,000 functionaries are employed by the “Homeland Security” police agency to spy on billions of emails, faxes, telephone calls of millions of US citizens. How effective the policing of tons of information each day is another question. But the fact is that the internet is not a “free and secure source of information, debate and discussion. In fact as the internet becomes more effective in mobilizing the social movements in opposition to the

imperial and colonial state, the greater is the likelihood of police-state intervention under the pretext “combating terrorism”.

The Internet and Contemporary Struggle: Is it Revolutionary?

It is important to recognize the importance of the internet in detonating certain social movements as well as relativizing its overall significance.

The internet has played a vital role in publicizing and mobilizing “spontaneous protests” like the ‘indignados’ (the indignant protestors) mostly unaffiliated unemployed youth in Spain and the protestors involved in the US “Occupy Wall Street”. In other instances, for example, the mass general strikes in Italy , Portugal , Greece and elsewhere the organized trade union confederations played a central role and the internet had a secondary impact.

In highly repressive countries like Egypt , Tunisia and China , the internet played a major role in publicizing public action and organizing mass protests. However, the internet has not led to any successful revolutions – it can inform, provide a forum for debate, and mobilize, but it cannot provide leadership and organization to sustain political action let alone a strategy for taking state power. The illusion that some internet gurus foster, that ‘computerized’ action replaces the need for a disciplined, political party, has been demonstrated to be false: the internet can facilitate movement but only an organized social opposition can provide the tactical and strategic direction which can sustain the movement against state repression and toward successful struggles.

In other words, the internet is not an “end in itself” – the self-congratulatory posture of internet ideologues in heralding a new “revolutionary” information age overlooks the fact that the NATO powers, Israel and their allies and clients now use the internet to plant viruses to disrupt economies, sabotage defense programs and promote ethno-religious uprisings. Israel sent damaging viruses to hinder Iran ’s peaceful nuclear program; the US , France and Turkey incited client social opposition in Libya and Syria . In a word, the internet has become the new terrain of class and anti-imperialist struggle. The internet is a means not an end in itself. The internet is part of a public sphere whose purpose and results are determined by the larger class structure in which it is embedded.

### **Concluding Remarks: “Desktop Militants” and Public Intellectuals**

The social opposition is defined by public action: the presence of collectivities in political meetings, individuals speaking at public meetings, activists marching in public squares, militant trade unionists confronting employers, poor people demanding sites for housing and public services from public authorities...

To address an active assembled public meeting, to formulate ideas, programs and propose programs and strategies through political action defines the role of the public intellectual. To sit at a desk in an office, in splendid isolation, sending out five manifestos per minute defines a “desktop militant”. It is a form pseudo-militancy that isolates the word from the deed. Desktop “militancy” is an act of verbal inaction, of inconsequential “activism”, a make-believe revolution of the mind. The exchange of internet communications becomes a political act when it engages in public social movements that challenge power. By necessity that involves risks for the public intellectual: of police assaults in public spaces and economic reprisals in the private sphere. The desktop “activists” risk nothing and accomplish little. The public intellectual links the private discontents of individuals to the

social activism of the collectivity. The academic critic comes to a site of action, speaks and returns to their academic office. The public intellectual speaks and sustains a long-term political educational commitment with the social opposition in the public sphere via the internet and in face to face daily encounters.

The original source of this article is Global Research  
Copyright © [Prof. James Petras](#), Global Research, 2011

---

[Comment on Global Research Articles on our Facebook page](#)

[Become a Member of Global Research](#)

Articles by: [Prof. James Petras](#)

**Disclaimer:** The contents of this article are of sole responsibility of the author(s). The Centre for Research on Globalization will not be responsible for any inaccurate or incorrect statement in this article. The Centre of Research on Globalization grants permission to cross-post Global Research articles on community internet sites as long the source and copyright are acknowledged together with a hyperlink to the original Global Research article. For publication of Global Research articles in print or other forms including commercial internet sites, contact: [publications@globalresearch.ca](mailto:publications@globalresearch.ca)  
[www.globalresearch.ca](http://www.globalresearch.ca) contains copyrighted material the use of which has not always been specifically authorized by the copyright owner. We are making such material available to our readers under the provisions of "fair use" in an effort to advance a better understanding of political, economic and social issues. The material on this site is distributed without profit to those who have expressed a prior interest in receiving it for research and educational purposes. If you wish to use copyrighted material for purposes other than "fair use" you must request permission from the copyright owner.

For media inquiries: [publications@globalresearch.ca](mailto:publications@globalresearch.ca)