Protest Email as Alternative Media in the 2004 U.S. Presidential Campaign

D. Travers Scott
University of Southern California
Annenberg School for Communication

Abstract

This paper examines humorous protests against U.S. President George W. Bush in the year preceding his re-election, which were dispersed online through email. Utilizing Atton's Typology for Radical and Alternative Media (2002), this paper argues that these protest email fall squarely within the tradition of U.S. alternative media. It also proposes a rudimentary typology for categorizing such email-based protests, referring to them as "virals" in order to foreground not only their non-hierarchical distribution and quotidian nature, but also their at times multimedia, performative, disruptive, or experiential aspects. The subject is limited by three major parameters: virals that are humorous, dissenting, and email-borne. Ultimately, by positioning these virals within the history of U.S. dissident or alternative media, this paper construes individuals using email to disseminate creative protests as Internet-era publishers or not-necessarily-broad-casters, and, as such, vital components of a liberal democratic political communications system.

Introduction

In the wake of the 2004 United States presidential election, this paper examines humorous protests against President George W. Bush dispersed online. While a rich literature exists examining the potential of various online media for voicing dissent and supporting collective action, I wish to focus on a very specific and everyday component of the online experience: email. Utilizing Atton's Typology for Radical and Alternative Media (2002), this paper argues that protest email fall squarely within the tradition of U.S. alternative media and proposes a rudimentary typology for categorizing such email-based protests. I refer to these protests using the term *virals* to foreground not only their non-hierarchical distribution and quotidian nature, but also their at times multimedia, performative, disruptive, or experiential aspects. Bearing in mind these latter attributes, virals may be considered as more humble relations of what elsewhere are termed memes (Bennett 2003a), mind viruses (Rushkoff 1994), or mind bombs (Downing 2003).

The focus here has three major parameters: virals that are humorous, dissenting, and email-borne. Humorous virals are specified in order to weed out traditional campaign materials and the forwarding of routine news stories or fundraising appeals. While acknowledging that protest emails are not exclusive to the left, dissent against the current right-wing administration is chosen to underscore the linkage to the history of dissenting media. Finally, email distribution is examined in order to emphasize the value of studying political communications that lack readily available systems for measuring audience size. Unlike web pages or downloads, email is more an online equivalent of word of mouth, yet is nevertheless worthy of study (a point upon which I will elaborate later). Ultimately, by positioning these virals within the history of U.S. dissident or alternative media, I construe individuals using email to disseminate creative protests as Internet-era publishers or not-necessarily-*broad*-casters, and, as such, vital components of a liberal democratic political communications system.

Several frequently neglected realms of communications and media research intersect in this topic: alternative media, especially digital media; humour, and email. Alternative media studies are relatively scarce, and those there are tend to predate (Kessler 1984) or disregard the most recent two decades (Atton 2002). Consequently, digital alternative media tends rarely to be the central focus but rather a prediction (Armstrong 1981), afterthought, (Downing 2001; Streitmatter 2001), due diligence (Atton 2002), or component of a larger study (Couldry and Curran 2003). Humour, a common tactic of persuasion and disruption, is notably marginalized in scholarly studies of alternative media, despite their not-infrequent humorous content (Armstrong 1981; Downing 2001; Streitmatter 2001) and the growing political influence of comedy (De Zengotita 2003; Pew Internet and American Life Project 2003a). Finally, despite the vast popularity of email (Kolko 2003; Cole 2004) – especially as a component of online political activity (Pew Internet and American Life Project 2003b; Institute for Politics, Democracy and the Internet 2004) – it receives scant attention. The Cambridge Scientific Abstracts Communications database (2004) yields over 600 scholarly works whose titles include 'web' and / or 'Internet,' yet only 24 containing 'email' or 'e-mail.' Such neglect has been frequently the fate of media not explicitly mass in its audience.

Yet, the study of email is warranted by the increasing role of individuals within the American political communications system and the increasingly hyper-individualized nature of U.S. politics and citizenship. Bennett (2004) incorporates individualized media into his three-tiered model of political communications media strata: *conventional* (mainstream, mass media), *middle* (blogs, webzines, advocacy groups, etc.), and *micro* (email, lists, personal blogs). Operating within this system he describes an emergent 'self-Actualizing Citizen' (unpublished manuscript) who has a far more individualistic, personalized worldview, greater distrust of and less

sense of obligation to government, and a predilection for membership in loose networks of action as opposed to traditional civil society organizations. Rahn and Rudolph (2001) find an Internet-fuelled decline in commitment to national identity among young citizens, leading in Europe to an embrace of supranational identities, such as the E.U., but in the U.S., without such an alternative, leading instead to an isolated, overall disenchantment with democracy. Bimber (2003) also sees information technology driving increasing individualization in political communications, but this trend is held in check by a dialectical tension with the economies of scale in the media business and the preference of individuals for entertainment over information. Others argue that a small subset of hyper-engaged citizens online is nevertheless influential enough to constitute an important new check and balance to mass media and governmental strategic communications (Baker 2002; Institute for Politics, Democracy and the Internet 2004). Finally, ten years of study from the Center for the Digital Future confirms that the individualistic Internet is actually displacing the mass medium of television (Cole 2004). Together, these studies suggest a political communications system in which individual prominence, identity, and media are waxing.

Conceptualizing 'Alternative'

The terms *dissident* or *alternative* roughly map a region of U.S. communication studies not frequently travelled. What scholarship there is employs various operational definitions. Some studies focus on a *dissident* press that agitates for social change, yet these often overlook right-wing dissident media (Armstrong 1981; Chase and Mulvenon 2002; Kessler 1984; Streitmatter 2001). One recent study acknowledges far-right dissident media but does not include them, only calling for their future study (Project for Excellence in Journalism 2004). Others utilize the term *radical* media to specify progressive politics (Atton 2002; Downing 2001; Drew 1997). The most common term, *alternative*, refers variously to any media with non-mainstream aspects (Armstrong 1981), media that are progressive and non-profit (American Library Association Task Force on Alternatives in Print 1980), media that challenge 'concentrations of media power' (Couldry and Curran 2003, 7), and even conglomerate-owned, advertising-based, urban weeklies (Benson 2003; Project for Excellence in Journalism 2004).

Addressing both alternative and radical, Atton (2002) assesses the transformative potential of media utilizing 'a theory of alternative and radical media that is not limited to political and "resistance" media but which may also account for newer cultural forms such as zines[1] and hybrid forms of electronic communication' (Atton 2002, 7). Acknowledging that 'social relations stand to be transformed through radical communications processes at the same time as the media (the vehicles) themselves stand to be transformed (visually, aurally, distributively)' (Ibid,

25), Atton's Typology of Alternative and Radical Media (Ibid, 27) approach examines six products and processes:

- *Content* (politically radical, socially/culturally radical); *news values*
- *Form* – graphics, visual language; varieties of presentation and binding; aesthetics
- *Reprographic innovations/adaptations* – use of mimeographs, IBM typesetting, offset litho, photocopiers
- *Distributive use* – alternative sites for distribution, clandestine/invisible distribution networks, anti-copyright
- *Transformed social relations, roles and responsibilities* – reader-writers, collective organization, de-professionalisaztion of e.g., journalism, printing, publishing
- *Transformed communication processes* – horizontal linkages, networks

These are not rigid criteria so much as identifying elements which may overlap; all need not be present. In addition, Atton recognizes radicality and alternativeness as dependant upon temporal, cultural, and geographic contexts.

Objectivity, Activism, and Alternative Media in the United States
The opinionated, dissident nature of current political virals links them not to mainstream but to alternative U.S. media, as does their deployment of humour. The history of U.S. alternative media is one in which advocates for social change have struggled to harness or adapt communications technologies in order to disseminate messages that, often using satire and humour, resist the acceptance of the status quo implicit in mainstream journalism's presentation of a positivistic, objective worldview. In their comparative analysis of the media and political systems of 18 western democracies, Hallin and Mancini (2004) describe the U.S. as unique in the degree to which its professional tenets of journalism require political neutrality or 'objectivity' and disregard a reporter's interpretative or analytical role. The resultant hyper-rational discourse expelled humour from mainstream journalism, where it has been only acceptable when carefully segregated away from 'the news' in entertainment or editorial sections. Although a long tradition of humorous political critique exists in the U.S., it is the domain of comedians and editorialists – not journalists (Smith and Voth 2002). This sober objectivity, combined with the lack of true pluralism in the U.S. majoritarian, two-party electoral system, has led to a political communications system in which an explicit perspective or opinion toward issues and social change, especially in news media, is seen as a marker of the alternative, fringe, or amateur.

This linkage of neutrality with *mass* media and opinionated activism with *alternative* media arises from the commercial revolution of the U.S. press. Schudson (1978) relates how the original U.S. newspapers vociferously expressed opinionated perspectives that reflected their mercantile or political founders, and this was a ubiquitous practice known to readers. Lichtenberg (1990) notes, 'Readers did not view these publications as sources of "the truth" about the world as we [in the U.S.] regard the mass media today' (Lichtenberg 1990, 103). With the launch of the *New York Sun* in 1833, 'penny papers' emerged with a lucrative new business model that included revenue from advertising rather than patronage. Combined with printing technology advances, this allowed them to eventually supplant their opinionated competitors. The penny papers declared themselves a 'free press,' claiming they were beholden to no one.[2] They positioned their news as objective truth because they were not the arms of political parties or business groups. Although this was perhaps more a competitive differentiation strategy than fundamental ideology, it nevertheless took hold as a core dogma of U.S. journalism: the mainstream presents a cool, neutral truth, whereas the alternatives exhibit activist, radical stances and overt desires to transform society.[3] Alternative media practitioners frequently cite as antecedents early print dissidents, such as Thomas Paine's revolutionary pamphlet, *Common Sense*, the activist publications of abolitionists and suffragists, and community-building newspapers of non-Caucasian populations (Armstrong 1981; Kessler 1984; Streitmatter 2001). Independent publishing by people of colour began in 1808 with *El Misisipi*, a Spanish-language paper. On into the next century, newspapers appeared centring on ethnic as well as ideological communities, such as pacifist, utopian, feminist, queer, communist, nationalist, labour, socialist, racist, and spiritual groups (Alexandre 1987; Downing 2001; Mesler 1997; Streitmatter 2001). Additional alternative print media included the amateur press, free urban weeklies, and personal zines.

Radio was intended as a wireless telephone, but middle-class male hobbyists or 'hams' and entrepreneurs quickly put it to alternative use, exchanging personal information and, in the 1910s, broadcasting music and news (Fidler 1997; Hargittai 2000). These 'airwave hackers' (Hargittai 2000, 50) transformed radio into the first electronic broadcast medium. In 1949, radical pacifist Lewis Hill began KPFA-FM in Berkeley, the first of the five alternative Pacifica Radio stations (Keith 1997). Its innovative revenue model of listener support rather than advertising inspired later public and Christian broadcasting. In the mid-1960s, the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) opened up for innovation the previously underutilized FM spectrum, from which arose underground or 'free-form' radio. Pirate radio arose in the 1980s, thanks to less powerful but more portable broadcasting equipment (Drew 1997), but in 1999 the FCC incorporated significant restrictions into their micro station licenses, punishing with large fines and equipment seizures those that did not comply.

Alternative cinema has run alongside mainstream film and video from nearly the inception of each medium (Downing 2001), finding audiences through private screenings, galleries, repertory 'art house' theatres, as well as other alternative media, including public television, cable, public access, and, eventually, videocassette, and DVD. Citizen activist use of video came to national prominence with the amateur taping of Los Angeles police officers beating motorist Rodney King, setting events in motion for the 1992 riots. Currently, user-friendly cameras and inexpensive software have brought digital video and editing to the home PC or laptop.

Television – expensive, thoroughly commercial, and tightly regulated from its onset – locked out radical use until the 1970s, when alternatives such as national public broadcasting, Christian media, and cable public access appeared. Legislators' attacks and funding cuts quickly and effectively neutered public broadcasting's original mandate for 'alternative' broadcasting that took 'creative risks' (Barsamian 2002, 26), leaving it reliant on corporate and audience support (Croteau and Hoynes 1994; Larsen 1997; Rossides 2003). A more successful example of audience-supported television was Pat Robertson's Christian Broadcasting Network, which aimed for Christian evangelism that would transform the U.S. in preparation for Christ's second coming. By 1994, it reached 70 countries and had become an umbrella for many other business ventures (The expanding CBN empire 1994). Cable television brought another attempt at subsidized broadcast media in 1972, when the FCC mandated community access to free equipment training, usage, and airtime. Within seven years, the Supreme Court struck down this requirement, but many cable systems kept public access as a public relations tool (Davitian 1998). In contrast to its often vanity, pornographic, religious, and fascist programming, public access bore one of alternative media's most frequently cited successes: Paper Tiger Television, whose projects included analyses of mainstream media's ideology and impact, prison system exposés, and, adopting newly affordable satellite access, protests against the first Gulf War (Bergen 2002; Drew 1997; Hazen and Winokur 1997).

As Internet adoption grew, pre-existing alternative media have moved online with networked, digital versions. Zines begat e-zines, and other dissident print media begat electronic editions; free-form and pirate radio, as well as alternative film and video, streamed through modems in digital formats (Atton 2002; Downing 2001; Drew 1997). Radical causes and communities organized through websites, blogs, email lists, and message boards at both national and trans-national levels. The 1999 World Trade Organization protests in Seattle spawned Independent Media Centres, a decentralized, worldwide network of over 90 alternative media collectives exhibiting 'a remarkable surge of energy in the application of digital communications technologies to political contestation strategies' (Downing 2003,

44).[4] The Internet has also been a central communications medium for the global social justice efforts of the World Social Forum (Whitaker 2003). Leftist political organizations, such as MoveOn.org, and maverick presidential candidates, such as Republican John McCain in 2000, and Democrats Howard Dean and Dennis Kucinich in 2003, have utilized the Internet for massive organizing and fundraising, if not votes (Boyd 2003).

Email
I wish to focus on a very specific and everyday component of the Internet, email, first examining it in terms of Atton's (2002) six elements, then discussing issues of audience size, and finally presenting my own descriptive typology of email virals.

Atton assesses the transformative potential of alternative and radical media across *content, form, distribution, reproduction, social relations,* and *communication processes.* In terms of email, obviously *content* varies by message and can be as radical as its sender desires. Although workplace and government interference do occur, it has been argued that email may have the most radical potential of online communication media because it is one of, if not the, most difficult to filter and censor (Chase and Mulvenon 2002). *Formal* elements within an email can also be as radical as the sender chooses. Note, however, that email also has its indigenous formal innovations, such as graphic uses of the standard ASCII character set, as seen in emoticons, ASCII art, and signatures. Email also transforms language and social relations. One of the inventors of ARPANET, a precursor of the Internet, attributed much of email's instant popularity to how it affected conventional language and social relations. 'One could write tersely and type imperfectly, even to an older person in a superior position and even to a person one did not know very well, and the recipient took no offense' (The Invention of Email 1998, 7). Over the years this new informality has developed abbreviations, acronyms, ideograms, and other shorthand, becoming even more pronounced in messages composed on mobile telephone keypads (Rheingold 2002; Thurlow and Brown 2003).

The digital era is one of *reprographic innovation,* with infinitely renewable zeros and ones replacing concrete materials. Reproduction is no longer the same issue or obstacle to publishing or broadcasting. There are certainly other barriers, such as network availability, equipment access, connection speeds, anti-piracy technologies, etc., but, among digital media, reproduction seems perhaps no longer to be as central a determinant of alternativeness. Similar to reproduction, *distributive use* changes in electronic media. Booking theaters, cajoling stores for shelf space, and hiding from police while wheat-pasting broadsides to a telephone pole are no longer applicable. The Internet could be considered a medium inherently alternative due, for one, to its decentralized distribution. Armstrong concludes his 1981 survey of U.S. alternative media with the belief that electronic bulletin board

services could become part of 'easy-access, decentralized technology, deployed in a non-commercial context, that can help create a media democracy in which everyone has access to information and to the means of communicating with everyone else' (Armstrong 1981, 367). However, one distributive issue remains relevent online: copyright. Here again, common email exhibits greater radical potential than not only other digital media, but any *mass* medium. As with similar one-to-one telephone conversations and telegrams, there is little copyright enforcement in email. I risk prosecution if I post the front-page photo from today's *Seattle Times* to my blog; the risk is minimal if I merely email it to someone. *Transformed social relations, roles, and responsibilities* include the interpersonal informality previously mentioned, as well an increased social acceptability for political activism. Email 'has made mixing the personal and the political more socially acceptable,' notes Boyd. 'Casually passing on a high-content message to a social acquaintence feels completely natural in a way handing someone a leaflet at a cocktail party never could' (Boyd 2003, 15). Email has *transformed communication processes* in ways beyond the mere electronic reincarnation of letter-writing. With its global network, it can act as what Chase and Mulvenon (2002) call 'a force multiplier,' allowing small groups and individuals 'to exercise influence disproportionate to their limited manpower and financial resources' (Chase and Mulvenon 2002, 40). Online anti-Bush communities, such as The GOOP and Reselect, interact almost exclusively through email in individual and digest forms (The GOOP 2004; Reselect 2003).

A final aspect of email that I would like to explore in more detail, necessary for its linkage to alternative media, is audience size. Media research not involving mass audiences is often disregarded, as if social change cannot be affected from the individual level. Yet, it seems unreasonable to insist that one-to-one media such as telephony or telegraphy were never used for transformative social change (as in get-out-the-vote calls on the night before an election), or that an individual piece of correspondence never had societal impact. How many people actually read Martin Luther's *Ninety-Five Theses* nailed to the church door? Would that issue of *The Alarm* had been any less radical had Emma Goldman been its sole reader; would it have had less effect on her life, activism, and influence? In addition, email is not exclusively one-to-one communication, but offers a full spectrum of audience sizes. Compare it to studying political communications in the medium of lapel badges: Thousands could see the messages if worn at a public event or maybe only like-minded compatriots at a group meeting are privy to them. Similarly, an email message has a potentially infinite number of direct recipients and indirect quotations and forwards. 'The success of radical media need not be based simply on the circulation and readership of specific titles,' Atton writes. 'Instead we must consider the networked totality of such media; individual calculations are less important than the decentralized, participatory mechanisms that enable a diversity

of voices to be heard' (Atton 2002, 131). Atton is unusual in asserting that audience size is not everything and has provoked at least one older scholar to rethink his definition of alternative (Downing 2001).

This outlook is similar to recent work that also questions the value of fixating on audience size in fields ranging from marketing to sociology. Whether coined Influentials (Institute for Politics, Democracy and the Internet 2004; Keller & Berry 2003), bystanders (Gans 1995), Online Political Citizens (Institute for Politics, Democracy and the Internet 2004), or a trendsetting elite (Pew Internet and American Life Project 2003c), there are growing efforts to assess, identify, and reach not large numbers of people, but the *right* people. For example, Fox News Channel's appeal to conservative viewers has shown how segment or niche marketing can bring success in a crowded category (Cox 2003; Grieve 2003; Tsubata 2003), and the user-transmitted messages of viral marketing are harnessed to sell Hollywood movies. As the Scottish songwriter Momus observes in his riff on Andy Warhol, 'In the future, everyone will be famous to 15 other people' (Phipps 1999). Ultimately, however, this is nothing new, but an evolution of the 'opinion leaders' of mid-century communications scholarship (Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet 1944; Lazarsfeld and Katz 1955). Perhaps the onslaught of mass media in the latter half of the twentieth century overshadowed this recognition of the importance of the individual and led to the unfortunate critical neglect of individualistic media such as email. Arguing for greater study of such media has broader implications than simply reintegrating individuals into media studies or lowering the minimum audience penetration required for academic notice. The last decade of musings on disembodied cyber selves, mutable identities, techno-utopic cyborg dissolutions, and orgiastic mass enmeshments in binary data streams now seem to describe only certain places, moments, and tendencies in the digital era. Simultaneously, digital media's increasing capability for personalization and customization also create hyper-individualism. Niche marketing and electronic narrowcasting create fragmentation that is perhaps not dissolution but individuation or differentiation. A model for alternative media online may be less about broadcasting and more about conversation, less about finagling a radical message into mass-media conduits and more about recognizing one's own simultaneous, overlapping roles as producer and distributor, user and node, author and channel. Rather our melting into the mass-media sea, *it* soaks into *us*.

Virals
The humorous virals I will describe are chosen not based upon their page hits, downloads, or blog mentions but upon their connection to alternative media traditions. I focus on anti-Bush virals deployed during the 2003-2004 presidential campaign but created at any time, and disseminated through email messages,

message attachments, and hypertext links within messages. They are organized into four loose categories: *simple, animated political cartoon, cinematic,* and *experiential.*

Simple virals consist of uncomplicated text, graphics, or combinations of the two. Text-only virals include satire, such as *Republicanism Shown to be Genetic In Origin* (2004) or *Résumé of George W. Bush* (2004), simple lists, such as *Some Excellent Ideas for New Bush/Cheney 2004 Re-election Bumper Stickers* (*Daily Kos* bloggers n.d.), or quotations of Bush's malapropisms and incorrect grammar, such as, 'Rarely is the questioned asked: Is our children learning?' (Kurtzman n.d., b). The graphic *Bush Countdown Clock* (n.d.) shows the time remaining until his anticipated ouster and can be easily added to desktops and web pages. Other virals with graphics include straightforward images, such as reprints of *This Modern World* comic strip by Tom Tomorrow (Perkins n.d.), media gaffes, such as Bush giving a goofy thumbs-up gesture while seated next to a dignified Kofi Annan (Wycliff 2002). Ironic images include the aircraft carrier photo op during which Bush declared an end to major conflict in Iraq on May 1, 2003, under a banner proclaiming 'Mission Accomplished' (CBS and Associated Press 2003) or the Bush action figure in full flight gear, which the event inspired (The Washington Post 2003). Images are combined or manipulated — obviously, as in *Bush or Chimp?* (n.d.), Steven DeGraeve's *If George Bush Were a Girl* (Delore n.d.), *Bushladin* (2003), and the commemorative *2000 Stolen Election Coin* (n.d.), or so carefully as to be thought real, as in *Bush Reading Upside-Down Book to Children* (Jaffe 2002). Others are more elaborate, as in two movie posters recast with Bush administration officials: *Mad* magazine reworked *Star Wars II: Attack of the Clones* as *Gulf Wars II: Clone of the Attack* (2002). After the Socialists' surprise win in the Spanish elections, U.S. web designer Matt Spiegler (2004) transformed the Mexican revolutionary drama *Viva Zapata!* into *Viva Zapatero!*

Animated political cartoon virals are the most conventional form. Political cartooning has long been a staple of alternative media (Streitmatter 2001). Online, their adherence to this tradition creates a formal homogeneity unlike simple virals, and their brief, setup-punch line narratives do not approach the complexity of cinematic virals. Yet, they are the most popular of email virals (Lasica 2002). Bruce Hammond's print cartoons for the *Boston Globe* are animated for its online edition and MSNBC.com. Mark Fiore writes his award-winning cartoons specifically for the web and sometimes includes interactive elements. Fiore's work, such as *Find the Terrorist* and *Catch 'Em!* appear regularly in MotherJones.com and the *San Francisco Chronicle*'s SFgate.com (Dube n.d.).

Short animations, videos, and films in digital formats comprise *cinematic* virals. The most uncomplicated are television clips, such as MoveOn.org's appropriation of Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld squirming on a national news program when

confronted with his contradictory statements (2004b). Similar direct excerpts also include home movies (*Bush Drunk at Wedding*, n.d.) and off-air news feeds (*Bush Giving the Finger*, n.d.) More creative efforts include the *Bush in 30 Seconds* contest, also sponsored by MoveOn.org, to create short anti-Bush ads for airing on the Internet and commercial television (2004a). Cable comedy-news show *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*, fast becoming the primary source of political information for young people (Pew Internet and American Life Project 2003a), has produced *Bush vs. Bush* (n.d.), a widely circulated clip in which footage of recent statements juxtaposes contradictory campaign statements, as if two Bushes are debating one another. Johan Söderberg much more extensively manipulated news footage to create a music video duet of Bush and U.K. Prime Minister Tony Blair apparently lip-synching the ballad 'Endless Love.' Although developed for Swedish television, it spread throughout the U.S. the following year via email (Kurtzman n.d., a). The Flash animation *Lord of the Right Wing* (n.d.) parodied the popular J.R.R. Tolkien books and films to attack Bush's debt to the U.S. Supreme Court for securing his first election as well as his pandering to the Republican Party's far-right base. Within 24 hours of the Bush campaign's first official television commercial, a volunteer at *The Blogging of the President* remixed the ad using much of its original script. To the litany of challenges the U.S. has faced, the remixed video's narration adds, 'and an arrogant man-child of a president who has pandered to big business, misled the nation into a brutal and unnecessary war, and taken strides in creating a deeper divide in this country than has ever before existed' (Bush Ad Remix 2004, 0:23). This commentary inserted into an original echo Paper Tiger Television's series of activists and intellectuals critically reading mainstream media such as *The New York Times*. Finally, the most popular viral of the election by far, escalating to multiple broadcasts on mainstream television, was the bipartisan *This Land* animation. Set to Woody Guthrie's well-known American folk song, *This Land* was the creation of commercial creative studio JibJab, whose clients include Disney and Sony. Its unusual bipartisan parody of both Bush and Kerry perhaps accounts for its popularity. I mention it here due to this unparalleled popularity, yet it doesn't wholly qualify as a work of protest, as it concludes with a feel-good scene of the candidates happily arm in arm, celebrating that, now that the native population has been displaced, this land belongs to both 'liberal wieners' and 'right-wing nut jobs' (JibJab 2004, 1:49).

Whereas the previous three categories can be embedded in an email, attached to it, or linked from it, *experiential* virals can only be described or linked. These vary the widest, at times evoking radical art theory and philosophy. In engineering funny, jarring, or illuminating real-life moments for the subject, experiential virals call to mind dada, surrealism, pranks, Situationists, Yippies, and culture jammers. Form and content are unlimited, giving this group perhaps the greatest radical potential. Examples include spoof sites, interactives, search-engine manipulations or 'googlebombs,' and hacktivism. Spoof site *WhiteHouse.org* surprises those looking

for WhiteHouse.gov, the actual site of the executive branch, with content such as 'President's Message to the Socialist Kingdom of Spain Regarding Its Fraidy-Cat Decision to Rejoin Old Europe and Flip America the Bird' and 'Women's History Month 2004: A Presidential Proclamation on the Cuteness of Letting Girlies Pretend to Matter and Stuff' (The White House 2004). Interactive experientials include Flash animations such as *Make Your Own Bush Speech* (n.d.), which, although seemingly cinematic, becomes experiential by elevating the viewer to co-producer. 'Googlebombs' use email and blogs to enlist mass online postings of key phrases and URLs, forcing associations between them in a search engine's computations. A recent example involved the phrase 'miserable failure,' an anti-Bush epithet from Democratic presidential nomination candidate Richard Gephardt widely repeated in the press, searching for which caused several major engines to deliver as the top-ranked result a biography of George W. Bush (McNichol 2004; Morrissey 2004). Another linked a pro-Bush merchandise site to the phrase 'dumb motherfucker' (Manjoo 2001). Experiential hacktivism, socially activist computer hacking, christened the Bush administration with a hack of the Republican National Committee website, replacing its content with an Al Gore endorsement (Kirby 2000). In contrast to cyber terrorism, such hactivism has been described as progressive social activism that is a component in 'an online hegemonic power struggle between the elite and the public' (Vegh 2003). The 2002 hack of newspaper site *USA Today* posted anti-administration articles, one of which was rumoured to claim Bush was appointing as a new 'Cabinet Minister for Propoganda [sic] and Popular Englightenment [sic],' Dr. Joseph Goebbels (Drudge 2002; Hansen 2002). Email is used to mobilize groups to manipulate online opinion polls, as process known as 'freeping' from its origins at the conservative political site, FreeRepublic.com (Pitt 2001). Bush is cited as an example to use on the 'is gay' site, a scripted site that automatically creates a fake local newspaper story of lewd public behaviour by whomever's name is typed into the appropriate part of the URL[5] (Ewing 2000 & 2001; Neighbourhood is in Shock as George W. Bush is Accused of Displaying Flagrant Homosexuality n.d.). Hackers protested the Bush administration's post-September 11th security efforts by hacking a server of the Federal Aviation Administration, downloading unpublished information on airport passenger screening activities, and posting messages on its website (Poulsen 2002).

My categories of simple, animated political cartoon, cinematic, and experiential virals represent only a rudimentary attempt at a typology of one subset of individualistic online communications. More documentation, preservation, and content analyses of virals are warranted, including comparison of virals across discourses other than politics. Ethnographic and other qualitative research could address those fundamental communication inquiries, namely, how are they used, by whom, and to what effect? This work could build upon Atton's work, perhaps

constructing a Typology for Alternative and Radical Digital Media. As most all media evolve into digital formats, from HDTV and MP3 to PDF and DVD, reassessment of transformative potential in terms of reproduction and distribution could address not only the ease of copying and sending digital files, but technologies which have arisen to prevent this, such as DVD regional encoding and digital rights management. In light of these, alternativeness may reside less in the medium and more in the circumventing technologies, such as region-free DVD players or decryption hacks, or alternative uses of technologies, such as copying multimedia content through video screen-capture software rather than direct duplication of files (echoing the humble photocopier in something of an analogue workaround to digital reproduction). Furthermore, as evidenced by the furious legal battles around peer-to-peer networks, file sharing, and copyright, alternative reproduction could be conceptually expanded to address not only copying but the intellectual property rights afforded or retained, as in the Creative Commons license or open source software movement. Finally, radical digital media must address issues of access, such as censorship and content filtering, digital divide, and network availability. More broadly, further examination of humorous virals could lend insight into the increasingly significant role of comedy television shows and personalities in political communications (Folkenflik 2003; Pew Internet and American Life Project 2003a; De Zengotita 2003), clips of which often go viral online. Finally, in emphasizing the individualistic nature of email, I join Atton in encouraging media studies beyond *mass* media.

Conclusion

In positioning humorous, protest email within the history of alternative media in the United States, my intent is not merely a clever shuffling of media typologies. My aim is to make a statement that the individual is an increasingly vital component of the political communications system of the U.S. liberal democracy. Scholars would be prudent to acknowledge as increasingly porous the membrane between interpersonal and mass media in political communication studies. Although the Swift Boat Veterans' television ads wreaked a devastating impact on the Kerry campaign, and the televised debates earned record-breaking ratings, in the CBS News forged memos scandal, individual bloggers trumped a major broadcast network's political news division, leading to the eventual resignation of is star anchor. Although discussing protests against U.S. software monopolist Microsoft, Bennett is applicable to political virals when he writes, 'Numerous derogatory images have travelled through Internet chats, networked campaign sites, and webzines, and surfaced in mainstream news accounts. The difficulty of anticipating the rise of such images – much less, using standard public relations techniques to combat them – has given activists new levers of media power' (Bennett 2003a, 162).

Undoubtedly mass media dominates, and will continue to do so, but individuals must no longer be conceptualized as mere components of an audience, active or otherwise. 'I know I'm a dinosaur,' said veteran political campaign media consultant Mark McKinnon, 'In the next couple of election cycles, my job as it's traditionally been practiced will be gone, will be extinct. Because the way we've practiced our craft for years has been broadcast television. And if we stay in that box, we're dead' (Heilemann 2004, 62). Not only are individuals producers whose work can travel on a trajectory through media strata (how often and under what circumstances being a subject for much-needed research), they are media organizations themselves, creating and distributing content to interactive, participatory audiences ranging from single digits to hundreds of thousands. The previously mentioned concept of Influentials is insufficient for understanding the import of individual communications, for it is limited to influencing other's opinions of mass media or issues on the national political communications agenda. This conception still deems the individual worthy only in relation to mass media. The importance of the individual lies not solely in relation to mass media – whether they can cross over, penetrate, gain access, create an alternative, or provide commentary relevant to it. The individual is important, worthy, and influential in her own right. That this point needs even be made for political communications scholars of liberal democracy is frustrating; that it is becoming increasingly, unavoidably apparent is heartening.

Notes
[1] Do-it-yourself personal publications typically handmade with photocopies and staples.
[2] Except advertisers, evidencing a U.S. cultural tradition of distrusting government far more than industry.
[3] This is not to say that mainstream journalism has rigorously maintained neutrality. The sensationalistic and often inaccurate yellow journalism of the 1880s affected pubic opinion during the Spanish-American War; both world wars saw blatant propaganda within the guise of mainstream journalism. Even these exceptions, however, nevertheless maintained a façade of professed objectivity and did not stop objectivity from becoming further entrenched as a tenet of mainstream journalism in the twentieth century. Currently, however, there are signs of this changing (Cunningham 2003), and news bias, as evidenced in the 2004 campaign's CBS News forged memos scandal, remains a contentious issue.
[4] The original collective closed its downtown Seattle office in 2003.
[5] http://george.w.bush.isgay.com

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