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Capitalism, Passions, and the Social Construction of the Internet

This paper summarizes ongoing research that looks at the role of culture in the social construction of the internet in the American context. It looks, in other words, at how U.S. culture has influenced the construction of the internet before 2001, and how the structure of the internet has played a role in cultures of social and political thought. It argues that the internet's real and imagined anarchic qualities are not a product of the technology, but of the historical and sociological peculiarities of how it emerged and was embraced. It finds several different cultural traditions at work in the development of the internet – most uniquely, romanticism. Beginning in the 1960s an increasing number of engineers and policymakers began to reinterpret the act of computing, not as calculation or prediction, but as a form of expression, exploration, or art, to see themselves as artist, rebel, or both, and to find communities with similar experiences that would reinforce that view. People need to express themselves, they said, people want and need spontaneity, creativity, and dragon-slaying heroism. Direct, unplanned interaction with computers offered an enticing and safely limited unpredictability that would fulfill those goals. That is why we need small computers instead of mainframes, the argument went, why we need personal computers instead of dedicated word processors, why we need the open, end-to-end distributed networking of the internet instead of proprietary corporate systems, why we should invest in 1990s dotcoms, why we need open source software. These discursive habits, the paper argues, had consequences: for example, the 1990s dotcom stock bubble and the persistence of neoliberalism through the 1990s owes much to the linkage of romantic tropes to networked computing. By the same token, the assumption that the internet is inherently democratic has caused us to approach it as such, which has made the internet a context for substantial grassroots democratic experimentation and agitation; the internet is democratic, not because of anything inherent to the technology, but only because we have imagined it as such, but, to a limited but significant degree, that is what we have done. The story of the construction of the internet shows how the creation of a technology is shot through with profoundly cultural forces – with the deep weight of the remembered past, and the pressures of shared passions made articulate.