

Click here to disappear: thoughts on images and democracy

By David Levi Strauss,
Created 2007-04-12 23:00

Photography has always had the *potential* to democratise images, but it has seldom worked out that way in practice. Digital imaging has made image-making devices ubiquitous. Many more people now possess the means to make images more of the time. At the same time, images are primarily used, in the public image environment, to influence public opinion and encourage the consumption of products and services. What is the relation between these two phenomena: near universal private image-making capability and widespread manipulation through public images?

I used to think that more people making images would necessarily lead to more conscious image reception, but I'm less sure of that now. It seems that it's possible to make images as unconsciously as one consumes them, bypassing the critical sense entirely. One of the main culprits here is time pollution, or "the pollution of temporal distance" that [Paul Virilio](#) [1] writes about. To regain our liberty (and our distance), we must slow the images down.

The Democratic Image symposium in Manchester, northwest England, on 21-22 April 2007 explores the state of photography in a globalised, digitised world. For details, click [here](#) [2]

The Democratic Image/openDemocracy blog is [here](#) [3]

To learn more about the Democratic Image project, click [here](#) [4]

Images online are both more ephemeral (in form) and more substantial (in number). They flicker across our eyes and jitter through our minds at incredible speeds. We spend more time collecting and sorting images, but less time looking at any one of them. One can never step into the same data-stream twice. The images from [Abu Ghraib](#) [5] suddenly appear and are everywhere, and then just as suddenly they vanish, leaving barely a trace. Photographic images used to be about the *trace*. Digital images are about the *flow*.

In political terms the distribution of images is more important than their collection, and the distribution of public images is still primarily controlled by corporations. Moreover, as decisions about the distribution of images become more and more concentrated in fewer and fewer corporations, manipulation increases and criticality wanes. The relative fluidity of access on the internet is rapidly becoming monetised (and thus, highly regulated) at every level. Whether or not the last vestiges of [net neutrality](#) [6] are obliterated by law in the next few years, the distribution of images will remain a function of the larger market. Although some possibilities for resistance still exist online, the overwhelming trend is toward managed "social" networks, ideological isolation, and mandatory advertising. Advertising engineers have long known that if you can isolate consumers and turn them into monads ensconced alone before screens, you can control them without having to worry about any "social" interference.

A critical displacement

Even as we relinquish our privacy (everything is visible under [Big Optics](#) [7]), we participate in the privatisation of the image in our daily dealings, where images are increasingly deprived of any meaning beyond the personal. So the two processes - private image-making and public image reception - have become fused. Under the [Pandaemonium](#) [8], we have become "a herd confus'd", as John Milton called us.

And rising out of this stampede is an enormous dust cloud of blind optimism. Everything is good and getting better under the Pandaemonium. Whatever problems arise will be solved technically. Stop worrying. There is no need to get involved. Go back to your monitors, everyone, there's nothing to see here.

This Panglossian imperative of the "[new digital democracy](#) [9]" is beginning to take on all the characteristics of a collective hallucination. When one objects to it, or merely questions it, the subject under hallucination can snap, and react with rage.

In the United States, the internet president turned out not to be Al Gore, but George W Bush - not the promise of universal access and its attendant responsibilities, but the irresponsibility of untraceable acts and anonymous speech. No one is responsible because no one can be singled out. Universal access means universal complicity. No one is to blame because everyone is "democratically" included.

David Levi Strauss is a [writer](#) [10] and critic. He is the author of *Between Dog & Wolf: Essays on Art & Politics* ([Autonomeia](#) [11], 1999) and *Between the Eyes: Essays on Photography & Politics*, which has an introduction by John Berger ([Aperture](#) [12], 2003)

Once again, the scope of the *demos* - the people - is being drastically reduced. "The people" now consists of the small percentage of the world's population with broadband internet [access](#) [13]. The *idiotes* (Greek for "private persons", referring to the 6,000 men who met on Pnyx, the hill southwest of the Agora, to speak out about the issues of the day, and who voted by raising their hands) have been replaced by [bloggers](#) [14], who now number over 70 million in the United States alone. So, who is left to listen, or respond?

Has democracy increased with the growth of the internet? Obviously not. It has diminished significantly. Why? Because the desire for public, democratic participation has been displaced onto consumer goods and services and dispersed into isolated individual speech. Whatever else it is, the internet is primarily an advertising medium. Access to images and information has certainly increased, but has this led to better informed citizens? No. It has led to more docile citizens, who spend more of their time in the collection and sorting of images and information (and in what [Simon Schama](#) [15] has called the computer's "[lazy democracy of significance](#) [16]") and less time on analysis, critical thinking, or real "socialising". Perhaps we need to find a word other than "democracy" to describe what's happening in our communications environment.

Source URL:

http://www.opendemocracy.net/arts-photography/click_disappear_4524.jsp

Links:

[1] <http://www.columbia.edu/cu/cup/catalog/data/023113/0231134827.HTM>

[2] http://www.redeye.org.uk/redeye/eventsdetail.asp?uvarEventID=379 target=_blank

[3] http://thedemocraticimage.opendemocracy.net/ target=_blank

[4] http://thedemocraticimage.opendemocracy.net/about/ target=_blank

- [5] <http://www.word-power.co.uk/catalogue/186207772x>
- [6] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Network_neutrality
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