# Bodies that matter, bodies that don't: Selective disembodiment in the early *Wired* magazine (1993-1997)

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## Abstract

This article investigates the relationship between disembodiment and cyberspace in early internet culture by analysing how bodies are represented in *Wired* magazine. Using a multi-stage qualitative analysis of the cover images, the cover titles and the cover articles of the magazine between 1993 and 1997, it reconstructs *Wired*'s discourse on bodies and cyberspace. The article suggests that *Wired* employs a discourse that I term *selective disembodiment*, a white male fantasy in which white women and people of colour matter only when they are disembodied in cyberspace, and only as disembodied entities: the voice and recognition they acquire by inhabiting cyberspace does not carry over in their embodied lives. This operates a political differentiation: between bodies that matter and bodies that don't. It is a vision of politics and society that, while superficially inclusive, downplays and curtails the agency of non-white, non-male bodies and still has implications for the internet today.

# Bodies that matter, bodies that don't: Selective disembodiment in the early *Wired* magazine (1993-1997)

What is the role of bodies in the immaterial and disembodied spaces created by the internet? This question preoccupied both popular culture and academic research on cyberspace (as it was called) in the 1990s and early 2000s. Fantasies and concerns surrounding cybersex (McRae, 1996) and role-playing (Stone, 1991), for instance, channelled the promises and the anxieties connected to the possibility of overcoming or abandoning one's body to partake in cyberspace as a disembodied entity, free to choose its shape and identity. As the famous *New Yorker* cartoon put it, "On the internet, nobody knows you're a dog" (Steiner, 1993) – or a man trying to pass as an Asian women (Nakamura, 1995). The rise of online and print outlets devoted to chronicling the cultural implications of the "technological revolution" contributed to popularizing such issues.

This article is concerned with questions of embodiment and disembodiment in relation to early internet culture. Following Mosco (2004), I look at discourses of cyberspace because of their relevance in shaping not only how we came to perceive internet technologies, but also how such discourses became socially and politically influential. After providing a brief sketch of the centrality of the concept of disembodiment to early utopian and critical views of cyberspace and internet culture, this article focuses on how bodies are represented in the first five years of *Wired* magazine, from 1993 to 1997. Although the importance of *Wired* to early digital culture is widely acknowledged in the literature (e.g. Mosco, 2004; Streeter, 2005; Turner, 2006), we lack systematic studies of the magazine's content. This article thus relies on an analysis of the cover images, the cover titles and the cover articles of *Wired* to understand the discourse on bodies and

cyberspace that is produced by the magazine. Given the overwhelming whiteness and maleness of the cover images, it then focuses in depth on two covers and cover articles that describe other kinds of bodies: a white woman (April 1996) and a black man (December 1994). Based on the analysis, I suggest that we consider *Wired*'s discourse on bodies and cyberspace as one of *selective disembodiment*.

Selective disembodiment is a term I coined to refer to the idea that the myth of disembodiment in cyberspace does not apply equally to all types of bodies; it is, in fact, a white male fantasy that sees cyberspace as highly beneficial for white women and people of colour, who are expected to use it to lose their embodied characteristics. According to this discourse of selective disembodiment, women and men of colour matter only when they are disembodied in cyberspace, and only as disembodied entities: the voice and recognition they acquire by inhabiting cyberspace does not carry over in their embodied lives. At the same time, white men matter offline too – they are the ones who can build cyberspace for everyone else. As is evident even from this brief description, selective disembodiment is inherently political, in that it stipulates a distinction between bodies that matter and bodies that don't. To articulate some its political implications, I rely on Scott's (2005, 2007) work on the tension between embodiment and notions of abstract citizenship. An investigation of the racist and sexist connotations of early cyberculture is acutely relevant today: as we explore how technologies, such as artificial intelligence, reproduce and exacerbate discrimination based on gender and race, while often being portrayed as objective and even emancipatory (Benjamin, 2019; Noble, 2018), we need to account for their discursive origin.

## Cyberspace and the myth of disembodiment

The notion of disembodiment was central to early theories of the internet, as well as popular representations of cyberspace. Such debates still reverberate on how we think about the relationship between self, society and technology today, and here I can merely sketch out their contours, without hope of fully doing justice to them. On the one hand, in the early theories and representations of the internet there was a strong utopian view that saw in cyberspace a form of liberation, based on the freedom to choose how one would appear online. On the other hand, a lot of scholarship was subsequently devoted to exploring all the ways in which gender and race differences went lost in the utopian view. Disembodiment is one of the sources of tension between these two positions.

In her writing about legal theory and the relationship between self and technology, Cohen (2012) powerfully highlighted how utopian views of cyberspace included "a vision of networked technologies as enabling freedom from bodily constraints" (p. 34). She then explained how disembodiment was central to different theoretical and political projects:

> for many thinkers about "cyberspace" and information policy, the advent of the Internet seems to seal the body's ultimate irrelevance to questions of social theory and social ordering, although different groups read that irrelevance differently. Thus, libertarian social critics see in cyberspace the eventual apotheosis of enlightened social and economic individualism (…) (Cohen, 2012, p. 35)

As Mosco (2004) suggested, this libertarian trend took even more explicitly political tones, configuring what he called the "myth of the end of geography", according to which social beings "are disembodied into the shifting identities of aliases, monikers, and personas" (p. 92). Consider, for instance, a classic document of this time, John Perry Barlow's (1996) *A Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace,* issued in response to the approval of the U. S. Telecommunications Act. The document proclaimed cyberspace to be beyond the reach of governments, due to its lack of both materiality and embodiment: "your legal concepts of

property, expression, identity, movement, and context do not apply to us. They are all based on matter, and there is no matter here. Our identities have no bodies, so, unlike you, we cannot obtain order by physical coercion" (Barlow, 1996). The disappearance of bodies was cast as one of the fundamental properties of cyberspace, which made it unreachable by and unavailable to traditional forms of political sovereignty.

In this utopian (and libertarian) vision, disembodiment is thus key to the experience of cyberspace and is considered a form of liberation. For Flichy (2007), this is the idea "that one can put one's body on hold, that computer technology can create bodiless human relations, disconnected from any engagement of the body in space and time" (p. 153). Writing about virtual sex, McRae (1996) underscored this sense of freedom: "In virtual reality, mind and body, female and male, gay and straight, don't seem to be such natural oppositions anymore, or even natural categories to assign to people. (…) In virtual reality, you are whoever you say you are" (p. 245).

The limitations of this utopian view, however, were made apparent by more nuanced analyses that sought to re-centre issues pertaining to gender, race, and sexuality in cyberspace. Here I will merely refer to Nakamura's work (Kolko, Nakamura, & Rodman, 2000; Nakamura, 1995), as it is representative of a broader scholarship (e.g. Lupton, 1995; Stone, 1991) that sought to stir the discussion towards the recognition of the meaning of embodiment and disembodiment in relation to cyberspace.

Nakamura's (1995) work on "identity tourism" in text-based communities on LambdaMOO addressed the racist implications of white users' attempts to pass as non-white, both appropriating and objectifying others' identities. While white users' forms of racial passing were allowed, because they didn't threaten the overwhelming whiteness of these spaces, those

who disclosed their non-whiteness were often accused of trying to be divisive by bringing race into a raceless space (Nakamura, 1995). The possibilities of experiencing disembodiment in cyberspace clearly looked different for people, and especially women, of colour, compared to the "default" white male users. Race and gender still matter in cyberspace, said Nakamura, and race and gender are not erased by cyberspace:

> While the mediated nature of cyberspace renders invisible many, (and in some instances, all) of the visual and aural cues that serve to mark people's identities IRL, that invisibility doesn't carry back over into "the real world" in ways that allow people to log in and simply shrug off a lifetime of experiencing the world from specific identity-related perspectives. You may be able to go online and not have anyone know your race or gender – you may even be able to take cyberspace's potential for anonymity a step further and masquerade as a race or gender that doesn't' reflect the real, offline you – but neither the invisibility nor the mutability of online identity make it possible for you to escape your "real world" identity completely (Kolko et al., 2000).

As evidenced by Kolko, Nakamura and Rodman (2000), cyberspace does not erase differences in real life – differences that are often connected to different types of bodies and that are ignored in the popular utopian views of new technologies that characterized early internet culture. To borrow Mosco's (2004) characterization, following Barthes (1972), of myths as depoliticized speech, the myths of cyberspace are supported by a powerful "myth of disembodiment", which erases the political and social implications of difference.

### *Wired*

The importance of *Wired* to early computer culture and to debates over cyberspace cannot be overstated. Founded in 1993 in San Francisco, *Wired* rapidly rose to popularity nationally and internationally, as the "hottest, coolest, trendiest new magazine of the 1990s" (Borsook, 1996, p. 24). With "a new layout that was a milestone in the history of press magazines" (Flichy, 2007, p. 99), the magazine set out to challenge other existing computer

publications, such as *PC World*, and establish itself as a sort of *Rolling Stone* for the tech scene. Imagined as the mouthpiece of the "Digital Generation" by its founder (Rossetto, 1993), *Wired* has become the most popular expression of the "culture of contemporary technocapitalism" (Fisher, 2008, p. 181). My article focuses on *Wired* because of its importance in reflecting and shaping the imaginary of cyberspace, especially in its most utopian characteristics: several of its key contributors, like John Perry Barlow and Nicholas Negroponte, have been crucial to the development and popularization of utopian discourses of cyberspace.

*Wired* is one of Turner's (2006) key cases for tracing the relationship between the countercultural movements on the 1960s and the libertarian ethos of cyberculture. He argues that the magazine is a crucial space for the construction of what I called the dominant technological imaginary of Silicon Valley (Ferrari, 2020), which was brought about by the convergence, in the 1990s, of three crucial constituencies: the burgeoning Californian tech scene, the libertarian politicians of the New Right, and the countercultural community of the 1960s (Turner, 2006, p. 217). According to Turner (2006), *Wired* set out to create, legitimize and model the "Digital Generation" as "a new kind of elite, born out of the antihierarchical ethos of the 1960s and powerful in a manner that matched that ethos" (p. 220). In a short time, *Wired*'s discourse became "the governing myth of the internet, the stock market, and great swaths of the New Economy" (Turner, 2006, p. 209); although the crash of the dot-com economy in 2001 temporarily curbed the more utopian visions of the internet, they are still embedded in the dominant technological imaginary of Silicon Valley today (Ferrari, 2020). The relevance of *Wired*'s early discourse for understanding our contemporary approaches to technology has also been highlighted by Karpf's (2018) recent commentary for the magazine's 25th anniversary.

Although scholarly research on digital culture frequently mentions *Wired*, systematic analyses of the magazine's content are scarce. A notable exception is Stewart Millar (1998), who examined the magazine's cover images and stories and found the magazine's content both sexist and racist. Although I largely agree with Stewart Millar's analysis and I build upon it, through my concept of selective disembodiment I will argue that the relationship between bodies and cyberspace is more complicated than what she suggests. Further, to my knowledge, disembodiment has not been central to any academic research on *Wired*. Given the importance of disembodiment to the debates over cyberspace, this article seeks to understand how central embodiment and disembodiment were to the discourses of cyberspace constructed by the early *Wired* magazine. What does looking at the bodies portrayed in *Wired* tell us about the magazine's view of cyberspace?

**Research Design**

This article is based on a multi-stage textual analysis of the cover pages and the corresponding cover stories of 54 issues of *Wired*, released in its first five years, between 1993 and 1997. The analysis combines visual and textual elements. Images and texts were coded for emergent themes (Corbin & Strauss, 2008) and grouped into macro-categories, such as "success" or "transformation"; connections were drawn between the macro-categories. Particular attention was given to the connections between the representation of different bodies and the themes emerging from the text. The analysis followed three iterative steps: first, it focused on the cover images; second, it considered the cover images in conjunction with the cover titles; third, it turned to an in-depth analysis of the images and text of two cover stories.

This exploratory analysis is intended to provide a snapshot of the first five years of *Wired* magazine, which saw the magazine's founder, Louis Rossetto, as editor in chief. These first years are considered to be the magazine's most influential period (Turner, 2006, p. 208); in addition to their importance, I chose these years to match the time period analysed by Stewart Millar (1998). It would be beneficial to extend this analysis to also consider more recent issues of the magazine and see whether there is an evolution in the discourse. Furthermore, this article only focuses on the covers and the cover stories; while covers set the tone for the magazine and communicate its vision to potential readers, other articles in the issues could have different takes on the question of cyberspace and disembodiment.

**Whiteness and maleness on the covers of *Wired***

The first step in my analysis concerned the main subjects portrayed on the cover of *Wired* between 1993 and 1997. Despite the enthusiasm about disembodiment, the covers of *Wired* magazine overwhelmingly showcased bodies or parts of bodies. Of the 54 covers considered in this study, only five do not feature bodies or bodily elements (e.g. hands, eyes). Three of those were published in 1997 and portray: a computer (January 1997), Apple's logo (June 1997) and a smiling cartoonish representation of the Earth (July 1997); the others are a blank page (January 1995) and a mix of objects (September 1996).

Six covers feature some bodily elements. Four of them are cartoon characters with anthropomorphic features: Sega's videogame's *Sonic the Hedgehog*, dressed as a corporate businessman (December 1993), a pair of duelling cartoon characters, Spy and Nerd, inspired by MAD magazine's *Spy vs. Spy* (June 1994); a computer-generated cartoon rendering of *Toy Story*'s creator John Lasseter (December 1995); a cartoonish and pixelated soldier (April 1997).

Two covers rely on body parts to deliver their message. In one of them, an open hand palm visually embodies the cover title: "Push" (March 1997). In the other, hands attempt to grasp eyeballs, while the title proclaims, "Capturing eyeballs" (October 1997)[1].

The majority of covers, however, rely on images of whole bodies – mostly white and male bodies. In fact, 27 covers portray an individual white man and 9 portray two or more white men[2]. Women appear (individually) on four covers (one of them is a white child, one a black woman). Two covers feature mixed-gender groups (one of which includes a black male). One cover is dedicated to a black man. Overall, it is evident that white males – young, middle-aged or old, in casual or formal attire – are the key demographic represented on *Wired*'s covers between 1993 and 1997. The last year considered in this study, 1997, is the first one in which the majority of covers does not portray white males, whether individually or in groups; this, however, does not result in increased representation of women or people of colour, but rather in an increased reliance on images that feature bodily (three) and non-bodily (three) elements. The bodies of the Digital Generation are overwhelmingly white, both in print and in real life. According to Turner (2006), the readers of *Wired* in 1996 "were 87.9 percent male, 37 years old on average, with an average household income of more than $122,000 per year. In a reader survey, more than 90 percent of subscribers identified themselves as either 'Professional/Managerial' or 'Top Management'" (p. 218). White male bodies on the cover of *Wired* promoted themselves to other equally white and male bodies. In the process, they also marginalized women who were

[1] A white man in a light blue shirt also appears at the bottom of the cover, but he is not the main subject of the cover.

[2] It is worth underlying that the cover of the September 1995 issue presents a photoshopped image of O.J. Simpson, retouched to appear Caucasian. Although such shocking design would suggest an articulated discussion of racial issues, the article mostly highlights "how Simpson's trial has revealed that our public institutions - especially the media - are guilty of making it impossible to resolve the most important issues facing our society" (Katz, 1995). In 2008, a brief piece on *Wired* sought to retroactively recast the meaning of the cover as an attempt to "make readers examine their assumptions about race" (Honan, 2008).

interested not only in reading the magazine, but also in writing it. It is true that a few women, such as Jane Metcalfe, Esther Dyson and Katrina Heron, were extremely influential in the first few years of *Wired,* but this did not necessarily make the magazine less male-centric[3]. As a former female *Wired* writer commented: "if one is not interested in participating in circle-jerk exercises and paying homage to the alpha male of the moment, what is there left to do at *Wired*?" (Borsook, 1996, p. 41).

**Selling success, selling the future**

The second step in this analysis focused on the cover titles, their themes and their association with the different kinds of bodies represented on the covers. The most prevalent themes associated with white males (alone or with other white males) are those of success, future, war/violence and transformation – rather conventional tropes asserting men's social dominance.

As remarked by Turner (2006), *Wired* attempted to promote – sell – an idea of financial and social success through cover stories that praised entrepreneurs, geeks and libertarian politicians. Through its stories and covers, *Wired* seemed to suggest that its readers, too, could be part of this successful Digital Generation – if only they adopted the right technologies and the right mindset. As Streeter (2005) neatly summarized, the promise was to: "change the world, overthrow hierarchy, express yourself, *and* get rich" (p. 777).

The covers communicate this idea of success in different ways; for instance, they speak of "world domination" (June 1993), "first cd-rom superstars" (August 1994), "the first digital

[3] In fact, even when Heron was editor in chief of the magazine (1998-2001), the covers of *Wired* continued to centre white men (32% of the covers) and objects (41%). Under Heron's editorship, women of colour appeared on two covers, but they were not the subject of the cover story, merely illustrations of the topic of the story.

supergroup" (November 1994), a "winner" (October 1995), the next "insanely great thing!" (with exclamation mark, clearly)(February 1996), "the most popular computer game of all time" (August 1996), "the most powerful banker in the world" (October 1996), and "the world's most influential online community" (May 1997). This almost hyperbolic language projects an image of extreme success and power onto the white males it describes, while at the same time legitimizing *Wired* as the powerful and successful mouthpiece of such powerful and successful men.

This idea of power and success is tied to the idea that the Digital Generation portrayed and supported by *Wired* both represents and shapes the future of the world. Four covers depicting white men explicitly use the word "future", as a noun and as an adjective; several others use related expressions such as "new" and "next". This discourse constructs the men featured on *Wired*'s covers as those who have either already seen the future – such as Bruce Sterling, on the inaugural issue, who "has seen the future of war", or William Gibson and "his latest report on the future" – or are actively involved in shaping it.

Thirdly, a good number of expressions used in the cover titles have to do with combat, war or violence. References to the death penalty appear twice, and war is specifically mentioned in five covers. Overall, there is a language of "fighting" and "slaying" that relies on warring metaphors to describe business competition and innovation.

Women and people of colour are largely excluded from this hyperbolic language of success, future and war. In fact, the most prominent theme associated with bodies that are not white and male is that of transformation. White men are also associated with transformation, but it is mostly some type of change – a revolution! – they are driving. For women and people of colour, it is either a personal transformation or a transformation they are part of, but not in

charge of. For instance, the March 1994 cover dedicated to artist Laurie Anderson is titled: "Laurie Anderson reinvents herself — again"; the emphasis is on her journey of personal transformation, not on its impact on the art scene or on the artist's success.

Similar themes emerged also in Stewart Millar's (1998) analysis of *Wired*, through which she underlined how women were stereotyped and excluded from the magazine, while its design and content were focused on constructing an "image of a hypermacho man who uses new forms of technology to reassert power" (Stewart Millar, 1998, p. 113). She argued that *Wired* portrayed digital culture as the stomping ground of white men, while "minority figures are of interest to *Wired* only as tokens and stereotypes that reinforce assumptions of racial inequality" (Stewart Millar, 1998, p. 107). While I agree with Stewart Millar's characterization, I argue that there is more to *Wired*'s sexist and racist portrayals of cyberspace: there is an attempt at claiming universality for a vision of digital technologies that is determined by the interest of a specific demographic – white American men.

**At the margins of cybersuccess**

The third step in my analysis focused on the discourse that emerges from two cover articles that are centred on non-normative *Wired* bodies: a white woman (April 1996) and a black man (December 1994)[4]. Analysing how *Wired* approaches non-white-and-male individuals can help us highlight the limits of the discourse of success and future promoted by the magazine. Each of the articles gives us clues to understand *Wired*'s peculiar vision of the relationship between cyberspace and bodies, which I call selective disembodiment.

[4] The December 1994 cover story was chosen because it is the only one that features a black man. The April 1996 cover story was chosen because it is the longest of the stories that focuses primarily on a woman.

*Disembodied multiplicity*

Sherry Turkle, the MIT professor who is on the cover of the April 1996 issue, is presented under the title: "Sex, Lies and Avatars: Sherry Turkle knows what role-playing in cyberspace really means". Although the long and insightful interview with Turkle only briefly refers to sex, among the many topics that she discusses, sex becomes the central concept for the cover title, which is likely a reference to the movie "Sex, Lies and Videotape". As Stewart Millar (1998) remarked: "the article, entitled 'Sex, Lies and Avatars,' subverts gender issues in favour of a discussion of cybersex. Like Anderson, Turkle is sexualized, with innuendo that suggests "she knows a lot about" cybersex (…)" (Stewart Millar, 1998, p. 99).

Besides the obvious reference to sex, there are also other features of Turkle's interview that reassert stereotypical representations of women. For instance, Turkle's interview is framed through the lens of personal transformation – which I identified as one of the major themes emerging from the sample of *Wired* covers. Such personal transformation, in Turkle's case, is expressed in two different ways: one, the connection between the personal circumstances of her life to her research; two, an emphasis on her multiplicity. The former, instead of legitimizing Turkle's work, actually implicitly diminishes her academic accomplishments, attributing them merely to her personal experiences. Speaking of Turkle's stay in Paris in 1968 and the opportunities for intellectual growth that she encountered there, the article's author, Pamela McCorduck, writes:

> Her friends were students and political activists. In *Life on the Screen* [one of Turkle's books], she describes a shy, English-speaking Sherry, who, to her astonishment, is replaced in Paris by a much more assertive and self-confident French-speaking Sherry. This self-transformation was happening inside language, what she would later learn psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan calls the construction materials of the mind. And it was language – slippery, ambiguous, elusive, potent

> – that would be the construction materials of the internet, too. Many years later, this self transformation growing out of language would illuminate for her how personae can willfully or unconsciously change from context to context, an idea that would come to preoccupy her. (McCurdock, 1996)

That personal circumstances influence greatly our academic interests is something we can relate to, but here McCorduck is turning Turkle's decades of academic research into a *Bildungsroman*, thus implicitly downplaying Turkle's authority. Turkle is not portrayed as someone who can speak authoritatively about identity, roleplaying and cyberspace because of her rigorous academic research, but rather because she has had experiences with negotiating multiple identities. This is the second frame that is employed to talk about Turkle – and as we shall see, it extends to all women. The two images that accompany the text of the interview superimpose three different pictures of Turkle's face, each fading into the other. Such imagery is meant to convey the idea of multiplicity that emerges from the article. This is, first of all, attached to Turkle's own life and experiences:

> She continues thoughtfully: "The goal of healthy personality development is not to become a One, not to become a unitary core, it's to have a flexible ability to negotiate the many – cycle through multiple identities." She'd experienced it in her own life again and again, found it articulated in Lacan's musings, watched it grow out of the data she's gathered in her own work. Now Turkle proposes it as a thesis for further thinking, future work – a key to living in our postmodern times. (McCurdock, 1996)

But importantly, this idea of multiplicity is extended to all women and is cast as a precursor to women's ability to inhabit cyberspace:

> Men's lives, especially, have been socially constructed along unitary lines, which, she speculates, may be why so many of them are having a hard time just now. But women today are trained and have already had experience in negotiating multiple roles. (McCurdock, 1996)

In this key excerpt – with the notable absence of direct quotes from Turkle – the article casts women as those who are ready to take on the multiplicity of roles required by cyberspace,

because they have been trained (by men? By market imperatives? By inequality?) to do so even offline. It is this training in precarity and identity negotiation that makes women meaningful for *Wired*: women matter because they have been trained to experience cyberspace as a disembodied multiplicity. The permanent inequality and precarity of women's lives here becomes a template for fully being able to experience what cyberspace has to offer. While the inequality that originates multiplicity offline is experience by tangible, sexed bodies, attempting to juggle multiple roles, temporalities and spaces, multiplicity in cyberspace is implicitly cast as liberatory and disembodied. While embodied multiplicity is inevitably tied to the burdens of inequality that affect women's life, the disembodied multiplicity of cyberspace is a playful interchange of roles. This is in line with neoliberal discourses that conceal the impact of women's precarious work conditions with a celebration of individual choice, flexibility and mobility (Baer, 2016).

*Disembodied racism*

Only one man of colour appears individually[5] on the cover of *Wired* between 1993 and 1997: John Lee, a New York hacker with the Masters of Deception hacker "gang". Lee's image is accompanied by the following title and subtitle: "Hacker Showdown: A member of a rival phreaker gang called John Lee a 'nigger' – and in the hacker underground nothing was the same again". Yes, the only black male body on the cover of *Wired* in its first five years of existence is associated with a violently denigratory term, which is integral to the cover title. The racial slur itself appears twice in the text of the story and once in the subtitle hosted in the internal pages. But to fully appreciate the discourse surrounding race and cyberspace that emerges from this

[5] Another black man appears towards the back of a group picture on the cover of the January 1994 issue.

cover story, let me briefly sketch the contours of the controversy it retells – known as the Great Hacker War of 1990-91.

The article is an excerpt from a book by authors Michelle Slatalla and Joshua Quittner, titled “Masters of Deception: the Gang that ruled Cyberspace”, which came out in 1995. In the text, the authors chronicled the emergence of two very different rival hacker groups: Legion of Doom (LOD), based in Texas, and Masters of Deception (MOD), based in New York City. Both of these groups were prevalently engaged in phreaking, i.e. tinkering and hacking phones and phone lines. John Lee became a member of MOD in 1990, under the screen name “Corrupt”. The other crucial hacker figure in this story is Chris Goggans, a white Austin-based member of LOD, by the nickname “Eric Bloodaxe”. The two individuals, and their respective groups, gave rise to a set of pranks and conflicts, which was triggered by the use of racial slurs and that escalated to a “hacker war”. Although probably unrelated to the conflict between these rival gangs, MOD members were indicted in 1992 on charges of computer intrusion and served time in federal prisons.

In this article, John Lee of MOD is associated with different discourses compared to those that are used to describe other hackers, in particular “rival” Chris Goggans. When introducing Lee, the article describes him as very capable, but also dwells on his personal life:

> Now, there's plenty that Eli [another member of MOD] doesn't know about Corrupt. He doesn't know, for instance, that he lives with his mom in a third-floor walk-up apartment in Bedford-Stuyvesant (that's Bed-Stuy; you've heard of it as surely as you've heard of Cabrini Green and East LA), one of New York's toughest neighbourhoods. Eli doesn't know that Corrupt will need no introduction whatsoever to the concept of MOD, because Corrupt is intimately acquainted with gangs. Out in the real world, out on the streets where you measure distance with your feet instead of your modem, Corrupt used to belong to a gang called the Decepticons. (Slatalla & Quittner, 1994)

Lee's background features prominently in his portrayal; in addition to the noteworthy repetition of the racial slur present on the cover, the racist tones of the article are further reinforced by the framing of this conflict between hackers as a war between rival gangs and the description of Lee's prior engagements in a street gang. At the same time, Goggans is described as business-oriented, a hacker who wants to put his skills to good use by creating a computer security firm. Although they are engaged in similar activities, Lee is portrayed as a potential criminal, Goggans as a potential entrepreneur.

This undoubtedly racist framing becomes even more interesting when it unfolds around the main controversy between Lee and Goggans. The main incident, as *Wired* recounts it, happened during a conference call – one of the most popular forms of phreaking – between LOD members, which was suddenly joined by a member of MOD (not John Lee). In the authors' words:

> Suddenly, another voice calls in to the conference, joins the group in midsentence.
> The unknown newcomer does not have an accent common to these parts.
> "Yo, dis is Dope Fiend from MOD," the newcomer says in distinctly non-white, non-middle class, non-Texan inflection.
> One of the Texans (who knows who?) takes umbrage.
> "Get that nigger off the line!"
> The newcomer is silent.
> In fact, the whole conference bridge is suddenly silent, all the chattering boys brought up hard and cold against the implacable word. You might as well have slapped their faces. Interminable seconds pass. Who wants to fill that void?
> That's it. As simple as uttering one ugly word. The racial epithet instantaneously moves northward over hundreds of miles of cable, ringing in the ear of John Lee, who sits at his Commie 64 in his Brooklyn bedroom way at the other end of the line. (Slatalla & Quittner, 1994)

This episode then escalated into a conflict between Lee and Goggans, who Lee assumed uttered the "racial epithet". The two engaged in a conflict that ultimately ended only with the indictment of MOD members. But interestingly *Wired* frames the offenses that these two

exchange in a quite different manner. Notice how, in the following, Lee's pestering technique – constant phone calls – is cast as a form of harassment towards Goggans:

> Sometimes John uses his street accent to harass Chris [Goggans]. The phone calls are constant. It doesn't help to hang up. The receiver is barely down before the phone rings again. And again. And again. Chris has to take it off the hook, and leave it off the hook for hours. (...) In Chris's mind, this type of harassment definitely falls into the category of Behaviour That Is Unacceptable. It's the kind of harassment he could help prevent, in fact, if he were to open his own computer security firm. (Slatalla & Quittner, 1994)

Goggans decided to respond to Lee's "harassment" by creating a racist parody of MOD's manifesto "The History of MOD". As *Wired* puts it, Goggans decided to "pull a little mischief" (Slatalla & Quittner, 1994) through a program that will turn English into "jive" – a parody of African American vernacular speech:

> Chris has an old computer program that will translate any file into a new "language." When he feeds The History of MOD to the program, out pops a "jived" version of the document. (...) Using the jive program is the electronic equivalent of appearing in blackface – a crude, minstrel show in cyberspace: "Some nigga' name Co'rupt, havin' been real active befo'e, duzn't gots' some so'kin' computa' anymo'e and so … sheeit, duh." (Slatalla & Quittner, 1994)

The fate of the jived version of MOD's document is to circulate back to Lee. But notice how Goggans' actions against Lee, correctly recognized by Slatalla and Quittner as "blackface", are nevertheless characterized by them as "crude, minstrel show in cyberspace" and as "a little mischief". Lee's actions constitute physical harassment, Goggans' do not. This framing makes clear the way in which *Wired* looks at how race shapes the relationship between the online and the offline. The constant calls that Goggans had to fend off had a material impact on his offline life – and his economic success! – and therefore they were harassment. But the racially themed offenses that Goggans threw at Lee were immaterial, lost in cyberspace, and thus simple pranks that did not result in tangible harm, even though they reinforced the racism that Lee likely

experienced in his offline life. For *Wired*, if something happens to people of colour in cyberspace, it remains confined to that disembodied space; it does not have meaningful consequences for their lives. It is only through their actions in cyberspace that black people come to be recognized by *Wired*, but they are also confined to that disembodied space, which is thought to not have repercussions on their offline lives. This discourse further entrenches racism into cyberspace, by establishing that the symbolic violence perpetrated against people of colour is inconsequential and ultimately acceptable. But it also forecloses spaces of existence and resistance for the racialized others: their offline lives, struggles, successes do not matter at all; their online lives are meaningful only as far as they effectively conceal race and the effects of racism.

**Selective disembodiment**

White women and people of colour have a place in the discourse of the white-male dominated *Wired* as long as they are part of cyberspace. It's Turkle's expertise on role-playing and John Lee's ability to hack that puts them on *Wired*'s radar. They matter because they inhabit cyberspace, and specifically because they have learned to use cyberspace to "lose" their bodily characteristics – to disembody themselves, to become the default internet user: a white man.

White women and people of colour are also the subjects that are traditionally excluded from liberal, abstract, disembodied notions of citizenship, as Scott's (2005, 2007) work on the French constitutional tradition reminds us. Speaking about women's inclusion specifically, Scott (2005) explains that for French constitutional theory "embodiment, after all, was the opposite of abstraction; hence women could not be abstract individuals" (p. 5). Women – but we can confidently extend this to men of colour – cannot be reconciled with disembodied notions of citizenship: their different bodies get in the way of the notion of what an abstract citizen should

look like (which is white and male, of course). Although Scott develops her argument around the idiosyncratic notion of abstract citizenship in France and its difficulty to include gendered (Scott, 2005) and immigrant (Scott, 2007) bodies, I contend that her insights apply more generally to liberal Western democracies. While the United States, as Scott (2005) suggests, have a different constitutional tradition that is not built around the notion of abstract universalism, it is clear that women and people of colour are still considered exceptional to the white-maleness that is the assumed default for true citizenship.

In the 1990s, as we have seen, *Wired* is asserting the centrality of white males to the future (of technology and society) and to success. Yet, the magazine also constructs white women and people of colour as the subjects that can benefit the most from cyberspace, precisely because cyberspace allows them to experience disembodiment – to leave their "different" bodies behind. Because these constituencies have historically been considered embodied, they need cyberspace to have access to abstraction and disembodiment. And it is precisely in this process of disembodiment that they come to matter for *Wired*. In the same way that French supporters of abstract notions of citizenship contend that abstraction can overcome all differences (Scott, 2005, p. 21), so *Wired*'s discourse of cyberspace suggests to white women and people of colour that disembodiment in cyberspace will allow them to be heard and recognized. But once they've reached this disembodied state in cyberspace, and they have been recognized as disembodied subjects, their embodied, offline lives are not *Wired*'s concern. All inequalities due to race and gender discrimination simply vanish in the disembodiment of cyberspace (for a similar argument, see Tal, 1996).

Furthermore, the "builders of computers and telecommunications networks" and "libertarian pundits and politicians" (Turner, 2006, p. 208) – the white men – in *Wired* are

significant (also) for their offline achievements and are portrayed as those who can act in service of cyberspace. In contrast, others matter only for what they do online, for what they do within a cyberspace that is built and maintained by white men.

Disembodiment in cyberspace is only needed by and only meaningful for those who are not white male bodies. White women and people of colour are embodied; their bodies get in the way of their recognition as part of the "Digital Generation". They need cyberspace to give them access to disembodiment, and thus make them relevant. White men do not need disembodiment at all, they are already full-fledged citizens of cyberspace – they are creating it. The cyberspace built by white men can allow others to leave their bodies behind and become worthy of attention, but white men do not need disembodiment to matter.

The discourse constructed on *Wired* is thus one of *selective disembodiment*. The magazine's discourse of cyberspace is not just a fantasy of white men who can afford to ignore how race and gender still shape online experiences; it's also an arrogant projection that pretends to assign meaning to other people's experiences of cyberspace. It implies that disembodiment is what truly counts in minorities' use of digital technologies. It also suggests that it's the endgame: once "others" experience disembodiment online, there is really no point in addressing the issues they might be facing offline. Once the digital divide is bridged, other divides don't matter to *Wired*.

## Conclusion

Looking at the bodies represented in *Wired* allows us to uncover a discourse of cyberspace that is characterized by what I have termed selective disembodiment. By this, I mean a discourse of disembodiment that is applied differently to different types of bodies, and that is

reflective of a white male utopia that is projected onto the lives of other. Selective disembodiment allows us to see how the discourse of disembodiment in cyberspace is a fantasy about the overcoming of difference through the elimination of the need of recognizing different bodies. Disembodiment, as we have seen, is cast as an opportunity for underrepresented groups to be heard and recognized by leaving the diversities of their bodies behind. They can only matter once they have disembodied themselves into cyberspace, and they only matter as disembodied entities – finally able to partake in the white male fantasy of cyberspace.

The discourse of selective disembodiment has social and political implications. This false utopia clearly differentiates – along the most traditional lines – between bodies that matter and bodies that don't. As Scott (2005, 2007) reminds us, decisions about which bodies become models for citizenship is fundamentally a decision between who is worthy of being a full citizen and who isn't. And discourses of cyberspace, as Mosco (2004) shows, were never just about technology, but also about a political and social vision of the future of the United States and the world. In this case, it's a vision of politics and society that allows under-represented groups to be heard only if they leave behind the diversities of their bodies. While superficially inclusive – of course, anyone can be part of cyberspace! – this vision downplays and curtails the agency of non-white, non-male bodies. Fantasies of disembodiment might seem less prominent today, but they are very much alive in the disembodied abstractions that power contemporary technologies (see Benjamin, 2019; Noble, 2018).

Selective disembodiment is also predicated on the belief in the equalizing power of technologies. Technology – so goes the belief – has the power to overcome the baggage of social divisions based on class, gender, race, by freeing its users from material and bodily constraints, thus making them all equal. It is not a new belief. In discussing the importance of machines in

the American 19th century, Leo Marx (1964) already underlined how enthusiasts argued that "technology supplants man's animal functions, thereby making possible the liberation of mind" (p. 186). But with the popularization of the Californian Ideology (Barbrook & Cameron, 1996), such false hopes in the equalizing potentials of technology have not only become mainstream; they have also conveniently obscured the need for addressing the pervasive inequalities that have been fostered by the neoliberal order. In fact, they have coated the key tenet of neoliberalism – the equation of market freedom with individual freedom (Harvey, 2007) – with a rebellious and countercultural flavour (Turner, 2006), further justifying the agenda of exploitation with an ethos of self-fulfilment. Selective disembodiment has a part to play in these discourses, because it helps reinforce sexist and racist arrangements, while making them seem more palatable, even progressive and emancipatory (Ferrari, 2020). As Barbrook and Cameron (1996) argued: "this utopian fantasy of the West Coast depends upon its blindness towards – and dependence on – the social and racial polarisation of the society from which it was born" (n.p). Selective disembodiment allows Silicon Valley to conveniently forget about disparities of class, age, gender and race and ignore the role that technology – in service of neoliberalism – plays in upholding them.

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