

The Invisible Empire

Border Protection on the Electronic Frontier



Submitted for the Degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

by

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Declaration

I declare that this thesis is my own account of my research and contains as its main content work which has not previously been submitted for a degree at any tertiary education institution.

Michael Kent

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Publications and Conference Presentations

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Conference Papers

Kent M.
'The Invisible Empire'
Cultural Studies Association of Australasia
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Kent M.
'Colonial Revenge, Virtual Resources, and the .TV Domain'
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Abstract

The first codes of the Internet made their tentative steps along the information highway in 1969, connecting two computers at UCLA. Since that time, the Internet has grown beyond institutions of research and scholarship. It is now a venue for commerce, popular culture and political discourse. The last decade, following the development of the World Wide Web, has seen access to the Internet, particularly in wealthy countries such as Australia, spread throughout the majority of the population. While this proliferation of users has created many opportunities, it also profiled questions of disadvantage. The development and continuation of a digital divide between the information ‘haves’ and ‘have nots’ was framed as a problem of ‘access.’ In the context of the increasing population online, debates into social inequity have been directed at technical barriers to access, the physical infrastructure and economic impediments to the adoption of the medium by all members of society.

This doctoral research probes questions of access with greater subtlety, arching beyond the spread of broadband or the expansion of computers into schools. Forging dialogues between Internet and Cultural Studies, new theories of the screen – as a barrier and border – emerge. It is an appropriate time for such a study. The (seemingly) ever expanding growth in Internet access is stalling. New approaches are required to not only understand the pattern of events, but the type and mode of intervention that is possible.

This doctoral research takes theory, politics and policy to the next stage in the history of digital access. By forging interdisciplinary dialogues, the goal is to develop the

concept of 'cultware'. This term, building on the history of hardware, software and wetware, demonstrates the imperative of understanding context in the framing and forging of exclusion and disempowerment. Mobilising the insights of postcolonial theory, Popular Cultural Studies, literacy theory and socio-legal studies, a new network of exclusions emerge that require a broader palette of interventionary strategies than can be solved through infrastructure or freeing codes. Commencing with the Universal Service Obligation, and probing the meaning of each term in this phrase and policy, there is a discussion of networks and 'gates' of the Digital Empire. Discussions then follow of citizenship, sovereignty, nationalism and the subaltern. By applying the insights of intellectual culture from the analogue age, there is not only an emphasis on the continuities between 'old' and 'new' media, but a confirmation of how a focus on 'the new' can mask the profound perpetuation of analogue injustices.

Access to the Invisible Empire occurs for each individual in a solitary fashion. Alone at the screen, each person is atomised at the point where they interface with the digital. This thesis dissects that point of access. The three components of access at the screen – hardware, software and wetware – intersect and dialogue. All three components form a matrix of access. However, the ability to attain hardware, software and wetware are distinct. An awareness of how and where to attain these literacies requires the activation of cultware, the context in which the three components manifest. Without such an intersection, access is not possible. The size of the overlap determines the scale of the gateway and the value of access. There is an interaction between each of these components that can alter both the value of the access obtained and the point at which the gateway becomes viable and stable for

entry into the digital discourse. A highly proficient user with developed wetware is able to extract more value, capital and currency from hardware and software. They have expert knowledge in the use of this medium in contrast to a novice user. In dissecting the complexity of access, my original contribution to knowledge is developing this concept of cultware and confirming its value in explaining digital inequalities.

This thesis diagnoses the nodes and structures of digital and analogue inequality. Critical and interpretative Internet Studies, inflected and informed by Cultural Studies approaches and theories, offers methods for intervention, providing contextual understanding of the manifestations of power and social justice in a digital environment. In enacting this project, familiar tropes and theories from Cultural Studies are deployed. Particular attention is placed on the insights of postcolonial theorists. *The Invisible Empire*, following the path of the digital intellectual, seeks to act as a translator between the digital subaltern and the digital citizen. Similarly, it seeks to apply pre-existing off screen theory and methodology to the Invisible Empire, illuminating how these theories can be reapplied to the digitised environment.

Within this context, my research provides a significant and original contribution to knowledge in this field. The majority of analyses in critical and interpretative Internet Studies have centred on the United States and Europe. While correlations can be drawn from these studies, there are features unique to the Australian environment, both socially and culturally, as well as physical factors such as the geographic separation and sparse distribution of the population, that limit the ability

to translate these previous findings into an Australian context. The writer, as a white Australian, is liminally positioned in the colonial equation: being a citizen of a (formerly) colonised nation with the relics of Empire littering the symbolic landscape, while also – through presence and language – perpetuating the colonization of the Indigenous peoples. This ‘in-betweenness’ adds discomfort, texture and movement to the research, which is a fundamentally appropriate state to understand the gentle confluences between the digital and analogue.

In this context, the screen is the gateway to the Invisible Empire. However, unlike the analogue gate in the city wall that guards a physical core, these gates guard a non-corporeal Invisible Empire. Whereas barbarians could storm the gates of Rome without the literacy to understand the workings of the Empire within, when an army masses to physically strike at these gates, the only consequences are a broken monitor. Questions cannot be asked at the gate to an Invisible Empire. There is no common space in which the digital subaltern and the digital citizen cohabit. There is no node at which translation can occur. These gates to the Invisible Empire are numerous. The walls cannot be breached and the gates are only open for the citizenry with the required literacy. This literacy in the codes of access is an absolute requirement to pass the gates of Invisible Empire. The digital citizen transverses these gates alone. It is a point where the off screen self interfaces the digital self. Social interaction occurs on either side of the screen, but not at the gateway itself.

Resistance within the borders of Invisible Empire is one of the founding ideologies of the Internet, tracing its origin back to the cyberpunk literature that predicted the rise of the network. However this was a resistance to authority, both on and off

screen, by the highly literate on screen: the hacker and the cyber-jockey. This thesis addresses resistance to the Invisible Empire from outside its borders. Such an intervention is activated not through a Luddite rejection of technology, but by examining the conditions at the periphery of Empire, the impacts of digital colonisation, and how this potential exclusion can be overcome. Debates around digital literacy have been deliberately removed or bypassed to narrow the debate about the future of the digital environment to a focus on the material commodities necessary to gain access and the potential for more online consumers. Cultware has been neglected.

The Invisible Empire, like its analogue predecessors, reaches across the borders of Nation States, as well as snaking invisibly through and between the analogue population, threatening and breaking down previous understandings of citizenship and sovereignty. It invokes new forms of core-periphery relations, a new type of digital colonialism. As the spread of Internet access tapers, and the borders of Empire close to those caught outside, the condition of the digital subaltern calls for outside intervention, the place of the intellectual to raise consciousness of these new colonial relations, both at the core and periphery. My doctoral thesis commences this project.