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The Rhetoric of a Juggernaut: AOLTimeWarner's Internet Policy Statement

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ABSTRACT   *This paper addresses an issue of public policy regarding the Internet. It is motivated by the belief that the Internet is in danger of being controlled by a few mega-corporations. We seek to understand the nature of such control by performing a textual analysis of the 'Internet Policy Statement' released by AOLTimeWarner in 2001. Our analysis reveals hidden assumptions, ideology and metaphor; highlights how rhetoric influences social expectations; and generally helps us make sense of the words of a mega-corporate managerial elite and how this elite views the Internet. We reveal a self-serving and persuasive public policy statement made by a corporate Juggernaut.*

Keywords: rhetoric, Internet, public policy, metaphor, close reading, AOLTimeWarner

> . . . institutions have learned to utilize postmodernism as a rhetorical strategy, constructing hyperreal communicative spaces that facilitate top-down control of public discussion and anesthetize the citizenry . . .[1]

This paper argues that a *rhetorical perspective* is critical in analyzing communication on, and about, the Internet. By 'rhetorical perspective' we mean one that is 'interested in what influences, what persuades people . . . it focuses on social truth, that is, on the kinds of truths that are created and tested by people in groups, truths that influence social and political decisions'.[2] Adoption of a 'rhetorical perspective' is useful in providing valuable perceptual, social and cognitive insights to the ways in which Internet technology can be mobilized within a capitalist system to influence thought and action. We focus on an example of rhetoric about the Internet that emerges from a mega-corporation: AOLTimeWarner's 'Internet Policy Statement' of 2001 (reproduced in the Appendix).

Further, we argue that the broad public interest will be better-served if use of the Internet as a means of corporate communication is subjected to wide-ranging critical scrutiny. Indeed, the need to conduct wide-ranging inquiry into the Internet has been captured nicely by Gibson.[3]

> After the Internet has saturated the cultural landscape people will construct their world views with different tools . . . [since] . . . the Web becomes such second nature that, like print, we hardly notice the immense paradigm it drags along with it.

We seem to have reached this saturation point; yet critical inquiry has barely begun.

We are prompted to focus on the statement that the [then] newly-merged media mega-corporation, AOLTimeWarner, proclaimed as its Internet policy in 2001 because this statement outlines AOLTimeWarner's policy regarding Internet-based discourse. Our analysis of it captures a wide range of textual and rhetorical perspectives by drawing upon critical apparatus suggested by Slagell,[4] Burke,[5] van Dijk[6] and Innis.[7]

AOLTimeWarner is the mega-corporation that arose from the merger of America On Line (AOL) and Time Warner in 2001. At the time of the merger, its business interests included America Online, Turner Entertainment Networks, CNN News Group, Home Box Office, Time Inc, Warner Bros and Time Warner Cable. The size and reach of the merged entity accorded it a pervasive social and economic influence. As a media behemoth it 'brought the world a revolutionary and supposedly placeless electronic transnational culture . . .'.[8] As a media-based mega-corporation it deserves special monitoring in terms of accountability[9] and institutional conflicts of interest.[10]

Our central argument develops from the view that setting the public agenda and determining public policy are important tasks in which the public interest (not the interest of a mega-corporation) should be in the vanguard. Leaders of mega-corporations closely allied with the Internet should not be relied upon to determine what the public interest is with respect to the Internet: they are an isolated self-interested elite, who are likely to define the *public* interest in a narrow, self-serving and perverse way. Consequently, pronouncements of Internet policy by the leaders of mega-corporations closely allied to the Internet ought to be regarded as not necessarily in the broader public interest. Such pronouncements should be analyzed critically through careful textual analysis: they demand vigorous and public challenge from a wide variety of perspectives.[11]

There ought to be many participants in the determination of public policy— and public policy debate regarding the Internet is no exception. It should not be hijacked by a mega-corporate elite. We must be alert to any attempt by a mega-corporation (such as AOLTimeWarner) to use its market power and ownership of large sections of a new and powerful technology to exert control over the determination of new public policy. Consequently, the assumptions, ideologies and metaphors underlying any mega-corporation's policy statement about the Internet need to be understood and dissected thoroughly, in the public domain. Consistent with Eriksson and Lehtimäki,[12] we give close attention to the strategy rhetoric in AOLTimeWarner's Internet policy statement and regard it as a 'symbolic dimension of power [through which] we may actually come to understand better the range and limitations of purely non-symbolic power'.[13]

In the following section, we engage in a close reading to expose the powerful rhetorical import of the AOLTimeWarner policy statement. We review the text of the statement in relation to its historical and contemporary settings in a fashion conceptually similar to Slagell.[14] We are assisted in our close reading by several of the strategies suggested by Martin.[15] For example, we endeavor to dismantle

dichotomies and expose them as false distinctions; examine silences or what is not said; fill voids by 'attending to disruptions and contradictions [in] places where the text fails to make sense'; decipher taboos by 'focusing on the element that is most alien to a text or context'; and interpret metaphors 'as a rich source of meanings'. We conclude that the centrality of rhetoric in the AOLTimeWarner statement is a means of privileging strategic perspectives of a mega-corporation and of influencing public policy and social expectations.

A Rhetorical Perspective on Internet Discourse

A conduit view of communication[16] underlies much writing and research devoted to Internet communication phenomena in the mass communication literature[17] and in the business literature.[18] However, such a view camouflages the social and economic importance of the Internet. We draw back that camouflage by adopting the perspective that a given communication medium, such as the Internet, 'is a *rhetoric* of media forms in which one is persuaded not primarily to a given content, but to see the world with a certain perceptual, social, and cognitive emphasis'[19] (see also Lanham[20] and Hargittai[21]).

   The rhetoric of a corporation's website is important also because of its capacity to create a seemingly-natural, unobtrusive worldview that conditions perception in such a way that the effects of the emerging Internet world largely go unnoticed and unchallenged. For example, we are often oblivious to the free labor required to facilitate the creation of corporate profitability in the Internet world: the labor provided by consumers of Internet media;[22] so-called 'volunteers' operating corporate website facilities;[23] and the unpaid overtime of so-called 'NetSlaves' working for Internet companies.[24] So, it is not surprising that the rhetoric of the Internet might also serve as an unnoticed, but powerful, conditioner of matters taken-for-granted.

   Our approach is influenced by the analytical perspective of Burke[25] and several of the rhetorical features he emphasized: the *rhetoric of religion*; the *rhetoric of hierarchy*; and *the rhetoric of development, progress and journey.*[26] Additionally, we are alert to '*the role of discourse in the (re)production and challenge of dominance*'[27] and to the merits of conceiving web-based communication as possessing two crucial, inter-related characteristics for it to be regarded as a dominant discourse: [privileged] *access* and *social cognition influence.*

   Privileged *access* to sophisticated and costly corporate sites on the World Wide Web contributes to the power and dominance of those who control access to such sites. This seems especially important in view of empirical evidence that the majority of Internet traffic goes to a handful of websites[28] (see also DiMaggio *et al.*[29]). The alleged liberating, democratic qualities of the World Wide Web are a common misconception: they are said to arise from the accessibility of websites and global inter-connectivity, and are largely illusory. *Access* to control of the content of corporate websites remains limited largely to company managements.[30] As Roscoe[31] contends, the Internet has become a *mass medium* 'whose dominant model is that of a small number of centralized sites of production, which disseminate content to a large numbers [sic] of receivers . . .' and whose defining feature is the creation of a 'World Wide Web audience'. Roscoe[32] argues that

   The very fact that the term 'audience' seems so innocuous these days is an
   indication of how effective the construction of the World Wide Web audience

as a concept in the popular imagination has been. The idea of an audience presupposes a binary opposition between producers and consumers, between the creators, providers and purveyors of content, and the 'audience' itself, which views, browses and 'consumes' the content. Internet users have come to be positioned as subjects who view the World Wide Web as a source of information (most often entertainment) and, recently, a place to make purchases, rather than a means of expressing their own creativity and ideas. The production of 'content' is increasingly seen to be a job for large commercial interests who can do this kind of thing 'properly'.

The potential dominating influence of websites in terms of *social cognition* is very important also in fashioning '[s]ocially-shared representations of societal arrangements, groups and relations, as well as mental operations such as interpretation, thinking and arguing, inferencing and learning'.[33]

Access and *social cognition influence* work together to bolster the power and domination of corporate capital and its control over discourse. The important implication is that web-based communication can be conceived of as a form of discourse control. It has the potential to be a form of social action control over the minds of people and to be engaged manifestly in the 'management of social representations'.[34]

We suggest also that Harold Innis' concept of the 'bias of communication'[35] is consistent with a rhetorical approach to analyzing the Internet. Comor[36] asserts that 'Innis' work provides valuable tools in efforts to assess what has become the focus of great interest almost fifty years after his [Innis'] death—the nature and implications of the Internet and more general digital technology developments'. Comor then poses analytical questions prompted by an 'Innisian' perspective:

> . . . will such technologies serve to democratize communications, breaking the monopoly of knowledge built up over the twentieth century by mostly large-scale corporate entities? Or, will the context of capitalism and its complementary technological, organizational and institutional mediators suppress such potentials, thereby consolidating the power of capital in deeper and more expansive ways?

Our approach to a rhetorical perspective on Internet discourse draws upon Slagell, Burke, van Dijk, and Innis in an eclectic fashion in order to critically and constructively engage with a new medium, the Internet.

Rhetorical Pronouncements by Corporate Juggernauts

Language of New Capitalism

Corporate Internet discourse has created a need to develop a *critical language awareness*,[37] since language on (and about) the Internet is an integral part of 'a restructured "global" form of capitalism [and one that is] gaining ascendancy' in the contemporary world.[38] This is often referred to as *New Capitalism*.[39] Whilst not referring specifically to the Internet, Fairclough[40] makes clear the central, contested, roles of language in the dramatic changes now occurring in the capitalist mode of production:

> There are winners and there are losers. Amongst the losses: an increasing gap between rich and poor, less security for most people, less democracy, major environmental damage. If markets are not constrained, the results will be disastrous. The political priority is to challenge this new order, and especially the neo-liberal claim that it is inevitable. Language is an important part of the new order. First because imposing the new order centrally involves the reflexive process of imposing new representations of the world, new discourses; second because new ways of using language are an important part of the new order . . . the struggle over the new order is partly a struggle over language.

Fairclough's 'struggle over language' becomes especially pertinent when the focus is the paradigmatic language medium of globalized *New Capitalism*, namely the Internet.

The Importance of Mega-corporate Policy Rhetoric

A first reading of AOLTimeWarner's Internet Policy Statement invites wonder about whether the company wanted to 'absorb' everyone as one of its consumers and have their lifeworld structured by AOLTimeWarner in a new, technologically-fashioned form of computer-mediated seduction or psychological dependence.

If the AOLTimeWarner statement is regarded as 'propaganda'[41] (as we suggest it should), then the following contention of Karim[42] is noteworthy:

> The implications of information society's propaganda are enormous. Its ultimate aim seems to be complete absorption of everyone into a perfectly working system of production and consumption that benefits only a few. It conflates data and information with knowledge and wisdom, promising a paradisiacal state of happiness for all who plug into the Internet. Several governments have decided that since this medium seems to be beyond control it can be self-regulated by industry. Many leading politicians appear to have staked their personal futures on the success of the information economy. It is touted as the answer to the problems of society. Whereas the moral debate on the Internet appears to be limited to content such as pornography and hate literature, the broader ethical challenges of unequal access, the differential opportunities for use, and the growing gap between those who are able to take advantage of the new media and those who are not go largely unaddressed. The myths of progress and of paradise are vital in explaining the vaunted benefits of the information society for all its inhabitants. This propaganda works because these myths draw upon the fundamental modes of human cognition.

When people's cognitive lifeworld is mediated and dominated by an electronic psycho-net and the allied digital tidal wave of content or product, then we have been washed over by a new life-medium. Postman[43] nicely summarizes this sea change: 'New technologies alter the structure of our interests: the things we think *about*. They alter the character of our symbols: the things we think *with*. And they alter the nature of our community: the arena in which thoughts develop'. Any questions raised about whether this change is good or bad seem rather irrelevant since we have become different social beings within this different lifeworld.

In the Internet age we seem to have been caught up in a process of corporate colonialism. We have become not only a malleable, consuming extension of the corporate producer, but also according to Korten,[44] part of a process of 'corporate colonization' involving the creation of

> . . . a world in which universalized symbols created and owned by the world's most powerful corporations replace the distinctive cultural symbols that link people to particular places, values, and human communities. Our cultural symbols provide an important source of identity and meaning; they affirm our worth, our place in society. They arouse our loyalty to, and sense of responsibility of, the health and well-being of our community and its distinctive ecosystem. When control of our cultural symbols passes to corporations, we are essentially yielding to them to define the power of who we are. Instead of being Americans, Norwegians, Egyptians, Filipinos, or Mexicans, we become simply members of the 'Pepsi Generation', detached from place and any meaning other than those a corporation finds it profitable to confer on us. Market tyranny may be more subtle than state tyranny, but it is no less effective in enslaving the many to the interests of the few.

We cannot live in such a world without consuming the product of whichever entity it is that will be among those that dominate the 'new world'. This is what makes AOLTimeWarner's policy statement crucial: they are simultaneously constructing *us* and this *new world*. Indeed, they would probably be delighted if we helped them collaboratively co-construct both the new world and its consumers.

This new world is not a phenomenon of nature. Rather, it is manmade, perceptual nut by cognitive bolt, by AOLTimeWarner and many others—including 'us' as consumers.[45] 'We' are simultaneously being transformed into suitable citizens of this new world—citizens who will willingly, enthusiastically, even unthinkingly, embrace being mediated by the Internet and allied devices. Although this is a total corruption of the word 'citizen', it provides plausible grounds to explain why AOLTimeWarner did not use 'citizen' in its public policy statement, but chose instead terms like 'consumer' and 'subscriber'. Thus, AOLTimeWarner's policy document is a blueprint to influence, as strongly as possible, the design of this new world and its inhabitants (who are 'citizens-cum-consumers'). We must analyze this document, since

> The policy actions being advanced by the elite consensus constitute an increasingly effective attack on the institutions of democracy—the very purpose of which is to prevent a small inside elite from capturing control of the instruments of governance. Their dominance of the policy debate precludes raising alternatives to prevailing assumptions.[46]

and,

> . . . the culture of consumer capitalism may have been among the most nonconsensual public cultures ever created. . . .[47]

All of the above makes it especially important to address Mitchell's allegation[48] that the globalized Internet language of *New Capitalism* will 'anesthetize the citizenry' unless the citizenry is made aware of the meanings of such language and acts upon such awareness.

The Privileged Position of Corporate Leaders

Korten[49] argues that there is a profound experiential and cognitive divide between a 'rich and powerful', but isolated, executive elite (who have authored or overseen the authoring of, corporate statements such as the AOLTimeWarner Internet policy statement) and the rest of society. He maintains that 'there is good reason to conclude that people who are so isolated from the daily reality of those they rule are ill prepared to define the public interest'.[50]

Proxy statements filed with the Securities and Exchange Commission [SEC] in 1999 show the isolation of the [then] corporate leaders of AOLTimeWarner. Even ignoring the value of stock options, [then] CEO Levin's 1999 remuneration exceeded $US10 million, sufficient to isolate him in the way Korten alleges. Since the ways a corporate elite expresses itself 'are substantively linguistic processes',[51] close scrutiny of the rhetoric and persuasion in AOLTimeWarner's Internet policy document become socially important. A privileged, cognitively-isolated elite should not be permitted to construct the master discourse of a new medium.

The AOLTimeWarner Internet Policy Statement

Authorial Ethos

The author of a text is important in a rhetorical sense since 'the speaker's life, insofar as it is public, forms a long prelude to his speech'.[52] Indeed, the character, or *ethos*, of a speaker is alleged 'to affect an audience'.[53] Drawing on this, one of the techniques of argumentation that speakers might employ 'when addressing several diverse and attentive audiences simultaneously' is the ploy of placing the substantial burden of persuasion upon the author's ethos.[54] If the speaker is perceived to be credible, honest, and knowledgeable, even likeable, we will react to the discourse differently than if the ethos is (in our minds) different. Not only is the author important rhetorically, but so too is the setting of a document. Text posted to the website of a respected government agency will be regarded differently than text posted to the website of an organization considered to be irresponsible.

The AOLTimeWarner Internet policy statement was an official 'document' posted on AOLTimeWarner's website. Accordingly, the setting ostensibly creates credibility and authority. But who is the author? No human author is identified. 'We' is used 30 times, so the author is some representation of the AOLTimeWarner entity. How should this be interpreted for purposes of assessing the effect of authorial *ethos* on the rhetorical impact of the policy document? Are we to interpret the 'we's' in the document as the joint CEOs [Lewin and Case] of the newly-merged entity and their managerial acolytes? Or should we regard the 'we's' as something more ethereal and more potent—the new company as a new Internet/media Juggernaut itself?

Rhetorical Features of the Statement

Because of word length constraints, the following analysis of rhetorical features is demonstrative, indicative and illustrative, rather than exhaustive and comprehensive.

First paragraph (lines 3–5, see Appendix)

> A fundamental change is taking place in the media and communications landscape—a change made possible by the Internet and the advent of new ways to connect, inform and entertain that we only dreamed of even five years ago.

This rhetorically fascinating, punchy and action-orientated sentence leaves no room for debate. The 'change train' has left the station, and we had better all be on it, or else! This change is so fundamental that it affects the *landscape* of media and communications. What is more fundamental than a changing landscape, the (physical) place where we work, sleep and pursue life? And this change is depicted as good, after all it is 'made possible' by the technologically-virtuous Internet and 'the advent of new ways to connect, inform and entertain that we only dreamed of even five years ago'. New things are almost always good, at least according to our media-saturated advertising culture. 'Connect[ing], inform[ing] and entertain-[ing]' are socially-virtuous as well.

The word 'advent' and the revelations of the 'fundamental change' made possible by the Internet evoke the *rhetoric of religion*.[55] This change was stuff that 'we only dreamed of even five years ago'. And since we typically daydream about desirable future states, call a good-looking person a dreamboat and nice things dreamy, all this sounds exceptionally good.

Does the inclusive 'we' in line 4 (using the line numbering in the Appendix) refer to AOLTimeWarner? Or does it refer to every one of us, together—all of us who are the potential beneficiaries of the abundant good things to be bestowed by the fruition of all this terrific stuff? It is impossible to tell whether the 'we' is meant to be universally inclusive or to merely refer to AOLTimeWarner. In all 30 usages of 'we', other than in the line 4 usage, the context indicates clearly that the 'we' is AOLTimeWarner. So, the ambiguity in this paragraph is, rhetorically, very slick. The 'we' can be intended either to be inclusive or exclusive. As a framing device for the entire document, it seems to work well as the inclusive 'we', thereby perhaps capturing the emotions of the reader.

'*Consumer.*' The first unambiguous reference to humans outside AOLTime-Warner is in line 8, where the word 'consumers' is used. This word occurs 25 times in the policy document, by far the greatest frequency of any word referring to non-AOLTimeWarner humans. We briefly analyze the company's marshalling of the word 'consumer' and reveal an apparent desire by AOLTimeWarner to influence construction of a species, 'consumer', having desirable strategic commercial attributes.

AOLTimeWarner seems to regard consumers as passive receptacles into which Internet content can be poured, once consumers make the (correct) purchase decisions (see usages in lines 6–9 and 12–15). These consumers merely *consume* what is on offer; they have been constructed to fulfill AOLTimeWarner's economic necessity. The phrase 'anytime and anywhere' following the first use of the word *consumers* (lines 6–9) is especially interesting, rhetorically, since it is an almost-verbatim importation into AOLTimeWarner's Internet policy document of discourse used by Microsoft Corporation.[56] This implies that the now-objectified person-as-consumer will, ideally in AOLTimeWarner's eyes, be a consumer everywhere and at all times; there is no longer—in this rendition of *consumer*—a private, human space.

Other usages (lines 75–76; 77–79; 80–83; 84–86) seem consistent with classic mega-corporate rhetoric in the age of 'New [caring, sharing, concerned] Corporate Capitalism'. The mega-corporate rhetors express clichéd platitudes: that is, *public relations-speak*. They want to be 'heard' for strategic purposes, but their track record has been characterized by slowness and disingenuousness in honoring their rhetorical pronouncements. Lines 76–79 contain a classic example: consumers are portrayed as beneficiaries of mega-corporate righteousness and munificence, presumably achieved by buying more products from AOLTimeWarner.

The company presents itself as a kindly uncle, nurturing doting nephews and nieces—its 'consumers'. This is most evident in lines 80–83 [recognizing that consumers have 'concerns' and committing to be 'friendly' in marketing to consumers]; and lines 84–86 [committing to clarity in the information it supplies consumers]. But this portrayal is unconvincing. Lines 77–79 offer, as an axiomatic truth, the challengeable view that the corporation and its consumers 'share' a [presumably common] 'interest' best mediated by the 'market'. Indeed, the company's policies are claimed to be 'market-driven', which to a critic might be an extreme example of 'the seduction of economic reductionism'.[57] Lines 77–79 have 'consumer' used adjectivally in a mildly confessional sense, implying that whereas there ought to be a common good and a one world view, nonetheless consumers do have a point of view, an axe to grind—and that this point of view needs advocacy.

Fourth paragraph (lines 12–15)

> In short, a new world is emerging—a more converged world, a more interactive world. At AOL Time Warner, we want to lead this new world, not only by providing our millions of readers, viewers, listeners, members and subscribers with instant access to a breathtaking array of choices in content and ways to connect, but also by spurring the development of innovative products and services that benefit consumers.

The 'fundamental change . . . in the media and communications landscape' (line 3) is revealed to be more fundamental than even a change in 'landscape'. . . it is a 'new world' with 'entirely new industries' (line 11). So, not just the surface (the 'landscape') of our environment is changing (and changing fast), but the very *terra firma* is also! When our entire world changes, it is apparent that everything changes. But, again, these changes are portrayed as good, because this newly-emergent world is 'more converged' and 'more interactive' than our old world, and these *seem* like good things. *Converged* seems to mean that 'we're all comin' together', which sounds nice. *Interactive* sounds like we are all going to be 'active' (and 'active' is good, both physically and mentally), but even better, *inter* active, implying mutually beneficial responses.

The fourth paragraph contains rhetorical dynamite. AOLTimeWarner asserts straightforwardly: 'we want to lead this new world'. There is no ambiguity about the 'we' here. It is unequivocally AOLTimeWarner that wants to lead the new world, implying that it wants everyone (including its millions of readers, viewers, listeners and subscribers) to follow. This is classic *rhetoric of hierarchy*—a hierarchy of two

levels—'a leader' and 'followers'. And in this particular hierarchy the duality of *leader/followers* operates also within the rhetoric of the *journey*.

The journey is 'a well-rounded figure of speech with deep roots in the American experience'[58]—and in the experience of many persons in countries colonized from abroad. However, the destination of the new Internet-based AOLTimeWarner is hard to discern. It is a sort of postmodern journey into hostile, uncertain territory, requiring strong, self-confident leaders and acqui-escent non-leaders. The journey's completion requires coherent organization and reliable servicing of the greater good, by the leader, in moving ever forward intact. This seems nicely characterized by the 'becoming' metaphor and the illuminating image of a 'wagon train' voyaging across the hostile, virtually limitless, American frontier:[59]

> For firms . . . the analogy is precisely that of the pioneer, leaving first a Europe stifled by bureaucracy, class and hierarchy and then the similarly restrictive eastern USA to strike out into a wilderness where . . . there is no safe path and everything is risked in pursuit of a vision . . . Leadership, in the person of the wagon boss and the scout, is inspirational and expert. Under its guidance the pioneers learn the wisdom to survive. They also learn to be flexible, acquiring skills as teamsters, soldiers, wheelwrights and veterinarians. But above all, they learn the importance of commitment. Dissent, or mere lack of enthusiasm, jeopardizes the whole enterprise . . . [and furthermore] the arrival itself is irrelevant. There is no arrival. To travel hopefully is the crux of the metaphor. Arrival suggests the end of change . . . [but the metaphor] is about perpetual change. The challenge is to 'thrive' . . . on the chaos of disorganized capitalism, the chaos of the unfettered market . . .

We now turn to the 'Policy Guidelines' section of the AOLTimeWarner Internet policy document.

The 'Policy Guidelines' (lines 188–209). The first sentence of this section, which is a policy for developing policy, is:

AOL Time Warner believes that a few basic principles should guide the development of a new public policy framework for a new world.

The use of 'believes' softens and humanizes AOLTimeWarner. After all, *to believe* is much softer than *to know* or *to declare*. And, it is only real people who believe, and belief elicits the notion of faith, almost in a religious way. Such evocation is rather unobtrusive, subtle, but yet effective in introducing a mild form of evangelical capitalism. Also, in the assertion 'a few basic principles should guide the development of a new public policy framework for a new world', the *new* is exciting, but needs taming. Perhaps a 'few basic principles' should 'guide' the 'development' of an important 'framework' for this 'new world'? Rhetorically, this is a remarkable sentence: simple, spare, but profoundly evocative, and speaking seemingly to core ideographs[60] of American life. This is a religious metaphor too: belief in a pathway to salvation ('a new world') through the divine guidance of 'a few basic principles' (a sort of Ten Commandments?) administered by AOLTimeWarner.

The first 'basic principle' (lines 191–194)

> 1. Public policy should foster individual choice and empowerment in the economic and social dimensions and rely on individual decision-making for determining the products, services and content available from media sources and on the Internet. Practices developed in the crucible of the private sector and the marketplace can best direct the development of these creative industries.

This [allegedly] 'basic' principle is far from basic. Its meaning is camouflaged. A strong implicit ideology is masked. We are expected to believe that individuals will be able to exercise some enervating 'empowerment' to determine 'products, services and content'. Very few people seem likely to argue against being ordained with this sort of superhuman empowerment. The word itself conjures positive images of autonomy and control of one's destiny. But, this is all very deluding because individuals in the Internet Age will not be empowered in any free-ranging, unencumbered sense. Their empowerment is more likely to be restricted to choosing from the options offered from a limited menu by 'media sources and on the Internet' (as the company says in this part of the policy document).

The private sector's ability to 'best direct' development of creative industries is likened to a 'crucible'. This virtuous noun is a powerful metaphor, conjuring an image of a purifying, intense ordeal by fire from which only good things emerge: a receptacle in which a diverse collection of ingredients is transformed into nectar. In this case, the 'private sector and the market place' is the 'crucible' and the nectar is the 'directive practices' engaged in.

The second 'basic principle' (lines 195–198)

> 2. Public policies should be market-driven and industry-led. Policies should be developed collaboratively, with input from industry leaders, government officials and, perhaps most importantly, consumers and other stakeholders. Public or private gatekeepers should not be allowed to prevent new entry, deny business opportunities or limit the free flow of information.

The assertion that 'public policies should be market-driven and industry led' slides quickly over complex issues, such as the meaning of 'market'.[61] Indeed, 'market' has a curious status in a world dominated by mega-corporations that seek doggedly to destroy competition and convert the market into internal administrative mechanisms.[62] This raises the issue of how 'market' and its variations 'market-driven' and 'marketplace' are used throughout the document. They are probably better regarded as ideographs.[63] They often carry at least partly-hidden ideological burdens.

The size and scope of AOLTimeWarner indicates that its alleged market is far from the rhetorical market of the small-producer-facing-a-given-price found in introductory economics textbooks. To build rhetorical capital by drawing upon the positive emotive meaning that many people ascribe to 'market' seems a

quite-dramatic perversion of the word. If we can be convinced through benign naming that the powerful machinations of an AOLTimeWarner are merely the operations of a simple Adam Smith-type firm in a (purely competitive) market, an impressive rhetorical turn has been achieved. Far from being a Juggernaut, AOLTimeWarner is portraying itself, rhetorically, as merely one of those neoclassical economic producers competing in a market—just as a greengrocer might compete in a vegetable market in a town square.

The third 'basic principle' (lines 199–202)

> 3. Where government involvement is determined to be necessary, policies should be technologically neutral and narrowly tailored, to ensure that the information, entertainment and interactive industries are permitted to respond to consumer tastes and preferences for news, entertainment and communications and that the value of the unique, interactive nature of this new converged and networked medium can be fully realized.

The essential *rhetoric of development, progress and journey* is engaged here to argue that determination of Internet public policy should be left to the private sector rather than governments. The language is telling. There is a begrudging concession that government involvement may be 'determined to be' necessary. But the use of the passive voice is significant because it masks the identity of who is envisaged as likely to make such a determination. As if dictated by axiom, we are implored to conceive government involvement negatively, as 'neutral' and 'narrowly tailored'. The implied corollary that we are presumed to accept as compelling is that private sector involvement will have much more positive outcomes of uniqueness, interactivity and capacity for 'full realization'.

This mildly hysteric free market language (especially when proffered by centers of power seeking to dominate economic and social activity, and seeking to privatize public assets and make public policy) is a dangerous language game with profound ideological and social implications. This can be shown in many ways. But we focus on just the 'narrowly tailored' metaphor. This expresses a normative ideal on the part of AOLTimeWarner, even in those (rare? exceptional?) instances when government 'involvement'[64] is 'determined to be necessary'. A 'narrowly tailored' business suit constrains scope of movement; the sense and ability to roam with wide-ranging physicality is prevented, at times to the extent that discomfort and perhaps even minor pain results. What a view of government . . . keep it under wraps as a rule, but if it does get out, dress it up in something akin to a straightjacket?

The fourth, and final, 'basic principle' (lines 203–206)

> 4. Policies should be designed to ensure that all segments of society and all countries of the world have access to the potential economic and social benefits of entertainment, information and communications capability—and that this new networked and converged medium becomes as essential to our daily lives as the television and the telephone, and even more valuable.

This 'principle' is staggering in its *faux* idealism and hypocrisy. AOLTime-Warner paints itself as a company of compassion, concerned with 'all segments of society [presumably including labor unions, anti-globalization radicals, the Internet-illiterate, the destitute] and all the countries of the world' [the very poor ones too?]. AOLTimeWarner seems to invoke *rhetoric of religion* to portray 'policy' as akin to a Salvation Armyist, dispensing charity to all who are in need, without question. But, incredibly, it confesses to wanting the 'entertainment, information and communications' dispensed to be essential: that is, for all and sundry to develop a dependency on the Internet. Disturbingly, this dependency is to be 'even more valuable' than current dependencies, indicating AOLTimeWarner has no qualms about potency.

The use of 'our' in this principle suggests that the executive elite at AOLTimeWarner want to join with all the rest of us as the media 'becomes as essential to our daily lives as the television and the telephone, and even more valuable'. But how can AOLTimeWarner both join with us as our daily lives are rendered Internet-friendly and (as they insisted in lines 12 and 13) lead this new world as well? Perhaps what appears to be an implausible metaphysical trick is just good rhetoric, as the company toggles between an exclusive ('lead') and inclusive ('our', in a universal sense) representation of themselves (or, itself)?

A final sentence of the 'basic principles' section reads: 'In sum, AOLTime-Warner seeks to maximize the economic and social benefits of media, communications and information technology with industry-led, market-driven policies that allow these dynamic industries to reach their full potential to improve people's lives'. Ostensibly, these words seem like harmless corporate fluff of the new millennium. However, in view of our analysis of the four basic principles and other parts of AOLTimeWarner's Internet policy document above, they should be looked upon more discerningly and critically. We must keep in mind that not only do 'managers work with words'[65] but that 'the primary task of management is . . . to construct a discourse of corporate coherence'.[66] Accordingly, we must treat the entire AOLTimeWarner Internet policy document with the utmost respect. The words it contains might not only be intended to be suasory, but also might reveal important features of the 'sensemaking' activities of the corporate leadership,[67] perhaps both for themselves and for (many) others.

Discussion

The Internet is a rapidly expanding medium at the heart of corporate communications in contemporary society. Yet, public policy in respect of the Internet and its use by corporations is under-developed. Pronouncements of public policy by isolated, powerful elites ought to be subjected to vigorous scrutiny and broader discussion. There are many potential benefits in exposing the assumptions, ideologies and metaphors that underlie the self-serving rhetoric in statements of public policy by mega-corporations.

Like any communication medium, the Internet ought to be regarded as a rhetorical device. It persuades those with whom it engages to perceive the world in a particular way. When mega-corporate elites who are dependent upon the Internet (such as AOLTimeWarner) speak about the Internet, they indulge in powerful rhetoric also. The 'public' (portrayed as passive purchasing receptacles of AOLTimeWarner products) are entreated implicitly to acknowledge, in adventist fashion, a belief in certain basic principles (*rhetoric of religion*). The 'public' is

entreated to follow 'leaders' [specifically AOLTimeWarner] (*rhetoric of hierarchy*) on a journey to greater fulfillment in some Utopian world (*rhetoric of development, progress and journey*). Highlighting such rhetoric serves good purpose: it helps make sense of the words of CEOs and other official corporate discourse and to expose the critically important, deceptive and self-serving nature of AOLTimeWarner's Internet policy statement.

We are entering a new communication age, the age of the Internet. It is an age that will be influenced strongly, or perhaps dominated, by mega-corporations such as AOLTimeWarner. Such strong influence suggests that those Internet policies achieving public acquiescence will have implications well beyond the Internet. Public policy that enables corporate colonization of the Internet will also facilitate the colonization of *all* public spaces, both *virtual* and *real*. Davis,[68] whose interest is in the colonization of public spaces, places this process in historical context as follows:

> . . . Both the textures of shared space and its potential for collective experience are being thoroughly revised. In the first half of the 20th century, the entertainment conglomerates were central in creating a nearly all-penetrating national and international mass culture, first through film and later through animation, popular music and televised sports. In the second half of the century, they have brought this largely American mass culture thoroughly and extensively into the home, to hundreds of millions of people. At the cusp of the 21st century, they are poised to weave the private realm together with the collective through the creation of dramatic and focused media-filled spaces. In the process . . . the media conglomerates are changing the relationships between public and private experience.

The Internet Age seems likely to be one in which society will strongly feel the need to reconstitute itself. If so, we must be alert to the rhetorical devices (including metaphor and ideology) employed by private, powerful elites and to their attempts to construct 'us' and the 'new communications world' in ways that render us as disenfranchised, pliant consumers in an Internet-mediated world. As citizens and scholars committed to democratic values in the twenty-first century, we must take with utmost seriousness the 'bias of communication'.[69] The scrutiny of corporate communications by corporate leaders, as here, is thus a crucially important function. Rule[70] puts our collective obligations thus:

> . . . technology is not destiny. The new technologies, if anything, widen the range of political options. Only active political decision making will determine whether they enhance or erode people's control over data about themselves, for example, or whether large institutions will grow more or less accountable to those whose lives they shape. Thus it is essential that those of us who care about these matters work to ensure that the 'information society' remains politicized—in the best sense of being invested with public attention and concern.

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45. See Roscoe, *op. cit.*
46. Korten, *op. cit.*, p. 140.
47. W. Leach, *Land of Desire: Merchants, Power, and the Rise of a New American Culture*, Pantheon Books, New York, 1993, p. xv.
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Appendix: AOLTimeWarner's Internet Policy Statement

(as downloaded 15 January 2001 from the aoltimewarner.com website; internal document hyperlinks have been removed; line numbering added for purposes of analysis)

1 **Developing Media and Communications Policy**
2 **in the Internet Century**

3 A fundamental change is taking place in the media and communications landscape—a change made possible by
4 the Internet and the advent of new ways to connect, inform and entertain that we only dreamed of even five
5 years ago.

6 Broadband connections that enrich the quality of online content like digital music and movies and broaden the
7 distribution of news, information and entertainment . . . wireless services and handheld and household devices
8 that make these products and services available to consumers anytime and anywhere—these are just a few of
9 the exciting new opportunities consumers can already access and enjoy.

10 These changes are energizing existing businesses and transforming traditional media, even as they create new
11 businesses and entirely new industries. And we are really only scratching the surface of what can be achieved.

12 In short, a new world is emerging—a more converged world, a more interactive world. At AOL Time Warner, we
13 want to lead this new world, not only by providing our millions of readers, viewers, listeners, members and
14 subscribers with instant access to a breathtaking array of choices in content and ways to connect, but also by
15 spurring the development of innovative products and services that benefit consumers.

16 We believe that creating value on this scale requires the right public policy structure. AOL Time Warner will
17 vigorously address the issues and opportunities that affect our existing businesses, both online and off. At the
18 same time, we will work together with all stakeholders—in both the public and private sectors—to establish a
19 public policy framework for the converging networked world. We believe that such a framework is essential to
20 encourage the continued innovation and dynamism that will drive the next media and communications revolution
21 —and benefit communities around the world—in the Internet Century.

22 **Policy Guidelines**
23 AOL Time Warner believes that a few basic principles should guide the development of a new public policy
24 framework for a new world.

25 **AOL Time Warner's position on specific issues of public policy:**
26 **Education and 21st Century Literacy**
27 **Closing the Digital Divide**
28 **Privacy, Security and Consumer Protection**
29 **Consumer Choice of ISPs**
30 **The First Amendment**
31 **Responsible Guidance on Entertainment**
32 **Intellectual Property**
33 **International Telecommunications Issues**
34 **Trade and E-Commerce**
35 **Taxation and E-Commerce**
36 **Postal Rates**
37
38
39 **Education and 21st Century Literacy**
40 In the Digital Age, education and literacy matter more than ever before, and media, communications and
41 information technology have an unlimited potential to improve the quality of our educational systems at every
42 level. AOL Time Warner believes that public policy must reflect the changing landscape of education and the
43 changing needs of young people entering today's job market.

44 Together with the AOL Time Warner Foundation, we are committed to making technology, education and 21st
45 century literacy public policy priorities at the federal, state and local level. We support a variety of programs and
46 efforts to connect schools, libraries and community centers, incorporate new technology into curricula, improve
47 teacher training, provide young people with the tools and guidance they need to succeed and help people of all
48 ages to improve their skills throughout their lives.
49
50 **Closing the Digital Divide**
51 Information and communication technologies can be a powerful force for good, offering greater economic,
52 political and social participation to communities that have traditionally been underserved. In the United States
53 and around the world, the online medium holds enormous potential to empower communities to meet their
54 economic and social needs. Developing nations have a particularly strong interest in taking advantage of the
55 unprecedented opportunity offered by the online medium to meet vital development goals such as poverty
56 reduction, basic healthcare and education far more effectively than ever before.

57 Together with the AOL Time Warner Foundation, AOL Time Warner supports a wide range of initiatives designed
58 to develop the information infrastructure, provide better education and awareness, and bolster community-based
59 projects around the world. We are committed to working with lawmakers and advocates to encourage a policy
60 and regulatory environment that fosters widespread access to information and communications technology in the
61 U.S. and abroad.

62 To us, bridging the Digital Divide is a strategic imperative—the more people come online, the more valuable the
63 global network becomes to everyone. To realize the full economic and social potential of this technology, we must
64 ensure digital opportunity for all.
65
66 **Privacy, Security and Consumer Protection**
67 Earning our customers' trust by protecting their privacy and ensuring their security is essential to the growth of
68 all of our businesses—and the growth of the online medium.

69 As the Internet has become increasingly central to people's lives, AOL Time Warner has established the strongest
70 consumer protection and privacy standards in the industry. Our commitment to ensuring children's online privacy
71 and security is a centerpiece of our public policy agenda: from putting in place special parental controls that help
72 parents guide their children's online experience, to working within our industry to increase public awareness,
73 provide families with valuable new tools and resources for the Information Age, and teach young people what
74 they need to know to have a safe, enriching experience in cyberspace.

75 We are committed to upholding fundamental principles of notice and choice in our business practice and to
76 helping establish industry-wide standards that benefit the development of the online medium and consumers.

77 Ultimately, industry, government, and consumers share an interest in building confidence in the online medium
78 through robust, market-driven policies, and we will continue to engage in dialogue with policymakers and
79 consumer advocates on these important issues.

80 AOL Time Warner has a history of recognizing and respecting the privacy of our customers online *and* offline. We
81 have led private sector efforts to build workable mechanisms that address consumers' concerns about the safety
82 and security of their personal information, while fostering consumer-friendly marketing practices tailored to
83 individual tastes and preferences.

84 Efforts such as the Direct Marketing Association's Privacy Promise—which AOL Time Warner adheres to and
85 helped to create—illustrate the successful execution of an industry-led program that offers the consumer clear
86 information on how information is used and specific actions they can take to direct its use.

87 **Consumer Choice of ISPs**
88 AOL Time Warner is committed to providing consumers with a choice among multiple ISPs on its cable systems.
89 We have taken the lead in the cable industry in responding to consumer demand for choice and innovation in
90 high-speed Internet services. And we are proud that our actions have helped to create a marketplace impetus for
91 building the architecture and business models needed to make cable an open, competitive platform for advanced
92 entertainment, Internet and communications services. In so doing, AOL Time Warner has changed the terms of
93 the "open access" debate—and expanded consumer choice.

94 The coming of broadband technology is turbo-charging media and communications—and benefiting consumers
95 in innovative new ways. AOL Time Warner's multi-year investment in fiber optic and digital technology already
96 enables more than 12 million consumers around the country to receive more and better video programming,
97 enhanced picture and sound quality, improved signal reliability and advanced communications products and
98 services. We are committed to working within our industry and with lawmakers to promote market-driven policies
99 that encourage the continuation of this robust and innovative environment for new digital services and expanded
100 consumer choice.

101 **The First Amendment**
102 AOL Time Warner has been and will continue to be a vigilant supporter of the First Amendment and the liberties it
103 protects. In part, this is because we have a rich heritage of the world's finest journalism and an unparalleled
104 record of innovation in the delivery of news and information. From the founding of the world's first news
105 magazine, TIME, in 1923, to the launch of the world's first 24-hour televised news service, CNN, in 1980, to local
106 24-hour news service and instantaneous, "anytime" online news, our company has changed the way people
107 around the world seek and receive news and information.

108 The First Amendment also protects freedom of expression—and AOL Time Warner is committed to fostering
109 human imagination and creativity. And we will continue to oppose efforts to censor, intimidate or chill the
110 freedom to express what is in our hearts and minds.

111 Since the first Internet content debate in 1995 concerning the Communications Decency Act, efforts to regulate
112 Internet content—from sex to gambling to advertising and other content—have continued apace. AOL Time
113 Warner has long been an advocate of putting those decisions—through technology—in the hands of
114 consumers.

115
Responsible Guidance on Entertainment
AOL Time Warner is dedicated to providing world-class entertainment, both online and off. Across all of our businesses, our company takes our responsibility to consumers seriously—providing them with the guidance they need to make informed decisions for themselves and their families.

For example, AOL Time Warner supports and participates in film and television rating systems, as well as parental advisory labels for music lyrics. Our subsidiary HBO pioneered a ratings system for pay cable offerings. To ensure that we target our advertising and marketing of movies appropriately, we support the 12 initiatives of the Motion Picture Association of America. We also refrain from marketing our R-rated films in a format or venue where the audience is 35% or greater children under 17, and we provide additional guidance explaining the reasons for all films rated for violence.

AOL Time Warner believes that industry-led initiatives such as these provide responsive, responsible entertainment guidance for parents—and foster the freedom of expression and creative endeavor our company stands for.

Intellectual Property
At the heart of AOL Time Warner beats the creative energies of thousands of filmmakers, songwriters, artists and authors, whose work and passions enrich people's lives every day. Protecting the copyrights and trademarks that safeguard the rights and ensure royalties for these works is essential.

Our company supports strong protection of intellectual property rights, both online and off. We have a long history of supporting efforts to combat piracy of videocassettes, CDs, books and more. We are being just as vigilant in the electronic world.

Enforcement of existing law, development of protective technology and new business plans to make these works available to everyone in every format, on every device, and over every medium, regardless of ownership, are the hallmarks of our strategy on intellectual property protection.

At the same time, AOL Time Warner believes that liability rules for infringing material and other illegal content should never unnecessarily impede innovation. A recent U.S. law, the Digital Millennium Copyright Act, provides a model approach—preserving the rights of artists, authors and other creators in a digital world, while appropriately limiting the liability of ISPs and other carriers, thereby ensuring that intellectual property can continue to be our nation's leading export and a major driver of e-commerce growth.

International Telecommunications Issues
Information technology and the interactive medium have the potential to greatly expand economic opportunity and strengthen communities around the world. To realize that potential, however, companies, countries and communities must work together in new ways to ensure that people around the world have convenient, affordable access to the goods, services and information the Internet makes possible. This is especially true in a world where traditionally distinct media are rapidly converging, offering an even richer range of opportunities.

To that end, AOL Time Warner is working to eliminate outmoded barriers to trade and impediments to the free flow of information caused by legacy telecommunications systems, while respecting existing frameworks and cultural differences, and strengthening our global commitment to protect consumers and children. We are also working toward privatization and liberalization of national telecommunications and communications marketplaces, so the Internet is affordable for the greatest number of people.

Trade and E-Commerce
The Internet and related technologies are advancing at a rapid rate, presenting new issues and challenges— both domestically and internationally—for the Internet to be used to deliver goods and services. The World Trade Organization (WTO) services negotiations offer an important opportunity to address such issues and to expand the benefits of e-commerce globally.

AOL Time Warner is actively working to persuade WTO members to commit to opening their markets in sectors critical to initiating and completing an e-commerce transaction. We believe that, within such an e-commerce trade package, WTO members should commit to providing national treatment and expanded market access in each sub-sector of the e-commerce "value chain." In addition, AOL Time Warner believes that Internet-based electronic transmissions should not be subject to tariffs or any customs duties, and that national regulations affecting e-commerce should be non-discriminatory, transparent and the least restrictive of trade as possible.

Taxation and E-Commerce
AOL Time Warner supports the creation of a neutral taxation system that neither favors nor impedes Internet-based commerce. The Internet must not be burdened by discriminatory taxes or ones that create special burdens for electronic sellers. Any tax rules that are imposed should be clear, fair and simple to comply with for large, medium and small companies doing business on the Internet. We will continue to promote pro-growth tax policies for e-commerce, and we are committed to working with governments to develop internationally compatible tax regimes through existing forums, such as the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development.

177   **Postal Rates**
178   In an age of online communications and e-commerce, the United States Postal System remains indispensable
179   to commerce and community. Serving more than 100 million physical addresses daily, moving about 200 billion
180   pieces of mail per year, this system remains a prime medium for business. For AOL Time Warner's magazines,
181   books, promotions, bills and more, USPS is vital.

182   We are committed to a robust and healthy postal system, with rates that are reasonable and affordable, and with
183   service that remains top notch. In an environment where USPS volume—especially in First Class, which serves
184   so many businesses—could decline from electronic competition, we will work with all other stakeholders in the
185   system to develop innovative and forward-looking policies that help to maintain a Postal Service that the public
186   expects and business needs to thrive in the 21st Century.

187
188   **Policy Guidelines**
189   AOL Time Warner believes that a few basic principles should guide the development of a new public policy
190   framework for a new world.

191   1. Public policy should foster individual choice and empowerment in the economic and social dimensions and rely
192   on individual decision-making for determining the products, services and content available from media sources
193   and on the Internet. Practices developed in the crucible of the private sector and the marketplace can best direct
194   the development of these creative industries.

195   2. Public policies should be market-driven and industry-led. Policies should be developed collaboratively, with
196   input from industry leaders, government officials and, perhaps most importantly, consumers and other
197   stakeholders. Public or private gatekeepers should not be allowed to prevent new entry, deny business
198   opportunities or limit the free flow of information.

199   3. Where government involvement is determined to be necessary, policies should be technologically neutral and
200   narrowly tailored, to ensure that the information, entertainment and interactive industries are permitted to
201   respond to consumer tastes and preferences for news, entertainment and communications and that the value of
202   the unique, interactive nature of this new converged and networked medium can be fully realized.

203   4. Policies should be designed to ensure that all segments of society and all countries of the world have access to
204   the potential economic and social benefits of entertainment, information and communications capability—and
205   that this new networked and converged medium becomes as essential to our daily lives as the television and the
206   telephone, and even more valuable.

207   In sum, AOL Time Warner seeks to maximize the economic and social benefits of media, communications and
208   information technology with industry-led, market-driven policies that allow these dynamic industries to reach
209   their full potential to improve people's lives.