

Wandren PD

A testing ground for new possibilities



## GRAMSCI AND THE NEW INTELLECTUALS

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*"In the tasks they perform modern intellectuals are descendants of the priestly upholders of sacred tradition, but they are also and at the same time descendants of the biblical prophets, of those inspired madmen who preached in the wilderness far removed from the institutionalized wickedness of their ways."*<sup>[1]</sup>

Lewis Coser.

The internet has become ["part of the every day universe"](#) according to Professor [Joseph Turow](#), he is supported by Professor [Steven Jones](#), who believes that "the moment is right," to treat the Internet "the way we refer to television, radio and the telephone." The ever increasing use of the internet has produced a new wilderness in which individuals disseminate the ideas of their respective ideological groups to a wider audience, and at considerably lower cost than other more traditional forms of media. The presence of [the Project for a New American Century](#), [Amnesty International](#), [the Electronic Frontier Foundation](#), [the Ku Klux Klan](#), [the Federation of American Scientists](#), and [Generation Terrorists](#) on the internet is testament to the ideological diversity currently available causing many to point to cyberspace as the new market place for ideas. Within a Gramscian context those responsible for the content of websites can be considered the "transmitter of ideas within civil society" and, therefore, fulfil the role of the intellectual.<sup>[2]</sup> This power to be an intellectual or gatekeeper of ideas, through which ideology can flow, is no longer restricted to an elite few, the freedom of the internet provides an almost infinite number of channels along which information can flow.

Drawing from Gramsci's writings on historic bloc formation, and the expansion of hegemony to prevent a counter-revolution, Internet use for political purposes can be broadly divided into two areas of alliance forming. Both attempt to create a wider base of support, the first by drawing groups into an alliance in an attempt to achieve a common goal, though the groups are not ideologically congruous. The second is to persuade groups to associate with the ideology. Although the internet has been used extensively for the first – indeed the organisation of the anti-war marches of 2003 was reliant on the power of the internet – the second is where greater emphasis needs to be placed and on which this essay will focus.

Within this context Marshall McLuhan's comments on automation and mass media are relevant to the internet, particularly the use of the medium for persuasion. He noted that within "mass media ... the source of the program and the process of experiencing it are independent in space, yet simultaneous in time." [3] Geographic distance is, therefore, not a factor to the speed of transmission of an ideological perspective. Not only can the internet link individuals over vast distances but as McLuhan argues in relation to automation, it "brings in real 'mass production,' not in terms of size, but of an instant inclusive embrace." Technology is not the limiting factor to contacting vast numbers of individuals simultaneously, and it is this combination of speed and scope that gives these new intellectuals such influence.

The role of the internet and this new breed of intellectuals has been particularly emphasised by the 9/11 attacks and the subsequent war on terror. John Stapleton, Patricia Karvelas and Martin Chulov have argued that "the internet is becoming a virtual forum for radical Islamic exchanges" and that websites are being used to "recruit followers and plan terrorist attacks." However, suspected terrorists are not alone in their exploitation of the potential power of the internet. The US State Department has attempted to utilize the power of cyberspace to create a more positive image of America. [James Boys and Scott Lucas](#) observe that the "Department's [website](#) is at pains to stress the all-encompassing nature of American society, one open to followers of all faiths, where the only absolute is the Constitution." The attempt to present an image of America welcoming to Muslims forms part of a complex strategy to persuade peoples around the world that the United States is not persecuting Muslims, and as such gain at least a passive acceptance of American initiatives. The need for this persuasion was recognised by Gramsci and conceptualised as the need to combine 'coercion and consent,' this was emphasised by Thomas Bates' analysis of Gramsci's writing;

"a social order, no matter how exploitative, cannot be understood simply as a conspiracy of wicked rulers. Rulers who can make a society work, who can make millions of people do their bidding and make them do it without the lash, are competent rulers." [4]

The use of the internet is just one part of the administration's attempt to 'sell America' [5] but these attempts are not only challenged by the informative web sites

of alternative persuasion but also by satirical sites that criticise and caricature the initiatives and those who proposed them, an area to which the administration find it difficult to respond.

The internet provides a unique environment for the ideological clashes that have occurred since the 11th September attacks. As cyberspace is a virtually unregulated environment in which national borders are rarely a limiting factor, the hegemonic group is unable to use the organs of the State for coercion. The result is an environment in which persuasion is the only tool available to groups, regardless of their position in society. Furthermore, given the relative ease with which a website can be created, and lack of extensive financial outlay required, the traditional advantage held by the US government of vast economic resources and technical power is significantly reduced, if not removed. The US government must compete on a virtually level playing field with groups of alternative persuasion, the appeal of the competing ideologies being coloured by the political affiliation of the reader. Some individuals may consider a government more credible than an independent group, while others will regard the government website with suspicion. Furthermore, any credibility afforded by the reader to the US government is constantly challenged or eroded by the satirical jibes from anti-Bush or anti-war websites. As such not only is the American government in a position of weakness, to which it is unaccustomed, but the Bush administration has little come back to being attacked through the use of satirical humour.

"The first task that Gramsci indicates" for those wishing to challenge the hegemonic groups "is a basically 'critical' one: to reveal the traditional behaviour of the intellectuals and to transform it..." [6]. Satire sites such as [Bushbacklash.com](http://Bushbacklash.com) perform this critical function as they caricature members of the Bush Administration and ridicule their initiatives, both the war in Iraq and the war on terror, in an attempt to persuade members of a global society that the traditional behaviour of the hegemonic group does not have a positive effect. Though it is doubtful whether this is a serious attempt to actually transform the administration's behaviour, more likely it is an attempt to undermine the government's credibility, these efforts are supported by sites such as [The Onion](http://TheOnion.com) who's innovative and satirical interpretations add to the negative image of the current hegemonic group within the US.

The use of the internet for relaxation and leisure, not just ideological debate, adds a further dimension to the struggle for influence. The US government sites are intended to be informative and as such are presented in a serious manner, with the exception of areas intended for children such as the White House kids hosted by [Spotty](#), the President's English Springer Spaniel, and Ofelia, the longhorn cow. Although kids sites are intended to be fun there is a subtle but clear attempt to encourage children from an early age to take an interest in the US political system. Following on from the example of White House Kids it is clear that web sites that are intended to be humorous are more likely to attract individuals surfing the net for relaxation, both inside and outside America, while still maintaining a political statement. The limited attraction of political or news related sites is emphasised by the [Lycos top 50](#), which provides an indicator to the most requested items on the net.<sup>[7]</sup> In [2001](#) the top three requested items were all related to leisure activities; Dragonball, Britney Spears and Napster. However, the top 10 also included Osama bin Laden (#5) World Trade Center (#8) and Nostradamus (#9). While it could be argued that as the sample period ended on 25 November the full effect of these searches had not been realised, of these three political examples the longest lasting entry in the Lycos weekly top 10 was World Trade Center (24 weeks), outlasting Osama bin Laden by a week. Furthermore, these items dropped significantly in the [2002 ranking](#) with Osama bin Laden falling to #60 (a 72% drop in the number of requests), with World Trade Center and 11<sup>th</sup> September being at #30 and #33 respectively. Importantly the only Government specific search to appear in the annual top 50 was the IRS (#6), probably due in part to the filing of on-line tax returns.

Although it is impossible to ascertain what motivated the individuals to search for certain items the rise and fall in requests for Nostradamus is an illuminating example. [\[I\]n the week following 11<sup>th</sup> September "Nostradamus received more searches in the week ... than any other search term over the past two and a half years."](#) Following this surge Nostradamus posted at #9 for 2001 on the Lycos annual rankings but fell sharply to #309 in 2002. The reason that so many people connected Nostradamus with September 11, according to Allen Wastler, managing editor and roving columnist for CNNfn.com, was ["a number of hoax e-mails, claiming to quote particular sections of his work. Here's a typical made-up verse:"](#)

*In the City of God there will be a great thunder,  
Two brothers torn apart by Chaos,  
While the fortress endures,  
The great leader will succumb,  
The third big war will begin when the big city is burning.*[\[8\]](#)

By September 12 [Hoaxbusters](#) had posted an article refuting these claims, which was quickly followed by a more detailed [account by David Emery](#), but neither could stem the surge of interest in Nostradamus. This event demonstrates not just the potential power of the internet to persuade people that something is true, however unlikely, but the importance of email within this process. Although there may have been some Spam mailing of these hoaxes, much of it was spread by personal messages and multiple forwarding. This use of personal contacts adds a further dimension to the struggle between competing ideological positions and the strength of the new intellectuals.

Many individuals send text and images reflecting different ideological and cultural perspectives, many of which will have originated from websites and enter circulation on email when someone visits the site and decides to send the image to a friend. This process dramatically increases the power of sites that would normally have a lower number of hits. Mass distribution only requires a few people to see the image and distribute it via email for it to reach numerous individuals who would not have thought to visit the original site. This endogenous dissemination of material presents a dynamic in which the State's official influence is virtually eliminated. This is a pure form of ideological conflict where individuals are free to retransmit or reject any image or ideology reflected in the email at their discretion. On occasions that the State may wish, it is virtually powerless to prevent this dissemination, and individuals decide what to do with the message on the basis of their own preference, without the fear of coercion forcing them either to transmit or destroy its content. Furthermore, most images once removed from the original website no longer carry any overt identification that would allow a casual viewer to ascertain the author's identity; the only individual the recipient is likely to associate with the content is the person who sent it to them, usually a friend or colleague. It is this contact, along with any message attached

by the sender that gives the image an element of context, rather than its original site and the political stance of the host. Even if the content does carry the author's identifying mark in many cases this will mean nothing to the recipient as these images are not from a limited number of well known brands but a plethora of individuals. This is an example of one such mark;



TWS is the mark of [The Worried Shrimp](#); "A plucky virtual fly in a savage cyber sea" A quick glance at the website will not provide much additional information as it is in fact an angling site. However, after some searching the Worried Shrimp does have a [Political toons, reviews and links page](#) which gives a clear indication of the anti-Bush persuasion evident in many of the images. However, this is much further than most individuals are likely to go having received an email with this image.

Most viewers are likely to draw the anti-Bush sentiment from it, form an opinion about the image then either forward it or delete it. They are unlikely to attempt to ascertain the author's identity and the credibility of their argument. Although in isolation this brief interaction may seem inconsequential, advertising companies for years have been exploiting the tendency of individuals to form opinions based on image and the repetition of an idea. In fact, [adverts now banned](#) from appearing on television under the new anti-smoking legislation are now being distributed via this very system. As such images sent by email can form a vital part of the struggle for public opinion within the online community.

Through a focus on messages received since September 11<sup>th</sup> it is clear that the State has to rely on private individuals for support of their policies and that they are unable to control these 'intellectuals' who transmit the ideology of their historic bloc. Although currently dominated by anti-war and anti-Bush sentiment there have been circumstances when the sentiments of the artists have been congruous with those of the US Government. This was rapidly forthcoming in the days after 9/11 and acted as a counterbalance to the flood of anti-American images that gained prominence at a similar time. However, as the war on terror has diversified and September 2001 has become more distant pro-war images have been swamped by a multitude of anti-American, Anti-war images that are complemented by a rising tide of attacks on George Bush Jr. as an individual and his credibility as President of the United States.





In the initial aftermath of 11<sup>th</sup> September, images circulated that mocked the US, not only celebrating the attacks but reflecting a deeper mistrust of American capitalism. The simple process of pasting an image of the

McDonald's Golden arches on to the radio mast on the North Tower of the World Trade Center allows the image of a "fly in" restaurant to be created. However, this simple act goes further and makes the globalising influence of the United States, in which McDonald's has been seen to play an integral part, the target for the attack itself assigning motive and claiming justification for the attack. Equally, the guiding of the plane into the Twin Towers in Bin Ladenman IV "Chaos in New York" identifies the sequels and syndication of American cinema associated by many as a form of US capitalist domination of many geographic areas with the acts of September 11. Moreover, the use of superman implies that this was a heroic act, building on the repetition of superhero stories that have appeared in American comics since the 1930s.<sup>[9]</sup>



Superman is regularly portrayed as a superhero battling injustice; however, he is restricted to a limited image of injustice or in the simplified world of the comic book evil. Umberto Eco argues that, "in the sphere of his own little town, evil, the only evil to combat, is incarnate in a species which adheres to the underworld, that of organised crime. He is busy by preference, not a against blackmarket drugs, nor, obviously against corrupt administrators or politicians, but against bank and mail truck robbers. In other words the only visible form that evil assumes is an attempt on private property."<sup>[10]</sup> While this is an oversimplification, as the original Superman comic strips featured corrupt politicians, Superman does have a tendency to protect the interests of conservative Americans and condones the idea of American values as the universally accepted standard of good. Conversely, Bin-Landenman represents the interests those who wish to see a shift in the



equilibrium of planetary politics, while still operating within the traditional boundaries of the Superman character, as interpreted by Gershon Legmen. Legman argues that “Instead of teaching obedience to law, Superman glorifies the ‘right’ of the individual to take that law into his own hands .... superman .... is really peddling a philosophy of ‘hooded justice’ in no way distinguishable from that of Hitler and the Ku Klux Klan.” [11] While, as Bob Dixon argues, to associate Superman with Fascism is going too far, “it’s a question of degree rather than of kind and that it’s only the ingredients, and their amounts, which differ.” [12] Bin-Ladenman exploits the idea of individual action to battle the injustices as they are perceived by some opponents of America. This image is given further power as it plays on the idea of a



**Two Boeings,  
\$30.000.000**

**Two towers,  
\$15.000.000.000**



**Palestinian children smiling,  
PRICELESS**

**Some things, money can't buy**



**For Everything Else,  
There's MasterCard**

advertising slogan. This suggests that it was not the money that could create the smiling faces, nor was it the things these vast sums could acquire, it was the destruction of the very things that had required such financial outlay that caused the celebration. Even the debate over the credibility of the news footage shown at the time could not detract from the

dual identity to accentuate a heightened sense of fear. Just as Lois Lane dismissed Clarke Kent in her search for superman so Americans are warned that terrorists, or the next Bin-Ladenman, may already be walking amongst them.

The use of American icons to emphasise that there were people around the world that do not share the ‘universal’ American values was continued through other means. The reworking of the MasterCard advert focused attention once again on America’s economic system while showing the delight that could be created through an inversion of the traditional



**The Terrorists have won the toss and  
have elected to recieve!**

sentiment of this image; the artist was revelling in the suffering and destruction that had taken place.

It was not, however, only the anti-American images that portrayed often offensive and provocative sentiment. Many artists called for a revenge attack, some targeting terrorists, some the



Taliban as the administration quickly made the link to Afghanistan, while others were broader with their identification of the enemy. Whether it was Boeing striking back at Bin Laden or a more general identification of Americans bombing terrorists, Kabul, or Afghanistan the message was simple; Americans were going to avenge the

attack. The concept that the terrorists had “won the toss and elected to receive” was particularly telling. The use of a phrase so associated with the start of an American Football match identifies the attack as the first act in what would be, from then on, an all American affair. As the US armed



forces closed in on Afghanistan and their new allies the

Northern Alliance began to roll back the Taliban images began to circulate that sought to emphasise American superiority both militarily and ideologically.

Some artists sought to ridicule the Taliban regime, particularly their attitude to women's rights. But these were balanced by one image in particular that questioned American intellect, the oversimplification of the Foreign policy to a “with us or against us” attitude, and their general geographic knowledge.

Dear Mr. Bin Laden,

Now that you have taken the time to get to know Boeing's fine line of Commercial Aircraft;

We would like to get you acquainted with Boeing's other fine products.

Sincerely  
*America*



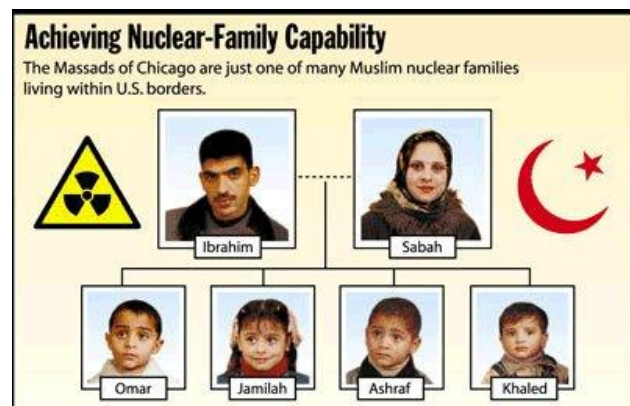


However, not all images based on current events were so obviously anti-American or anti-bin Laden / Taliban, a distinction that became increasingly blurred.

The Osama bin Laden University prospectus that circulated via email (see prospectus), not only mocks those who follow bin Laden but also incorporates into the joke the terror attacks that had been successfully executed against US targets. Whether the piece is seen as politically motivated depends on the political persuasion of the individual and can only really serve to support that individual's point of view due to the ambiguity.

The image of a Muslim nuclear family is equally ambiguous in its nature, allowing individuals to read it as an anti-Muslim or anti-American piece.

However, a strong argument could also



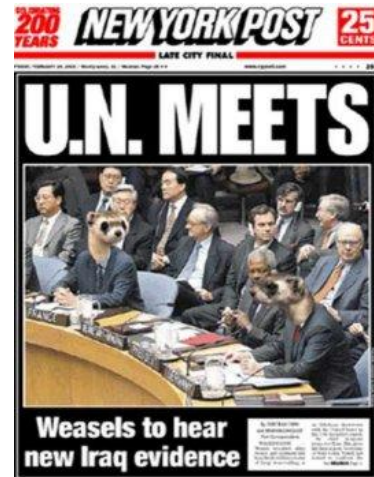
political persuasions are reflected. Within the ideological struggle these may not appear immediately to have a place, but they serve as further repetition of the recipient's political position, helping to reinforce that point against the challenges of the many alternatives.

The likelihood of war with Iraq has caused the



production and dissemination of many cartoons and photographic images. This pro-war statement was seen by significantly more people, when it was transmitted by email, than just those travelling on the road that day. The sentiment feeds into the 'with us or against us' attitude that prompted the labelling of dissenting countries the 'Axis of weasels'.

Both images were circulated with the intent of making dissenters feel ill at ease with their convictions. In this case the US government has been able to gain support from private individuals who have transmitted the ideology of the hegemonic group within America to numerous



individuals throughout the world via the internet. However, individuals transmitting anti-war and anti-Bush ideology have been vastly more successful in producing and circulating considerable quantities of material, attacking the President along personal, and ideological, lines.

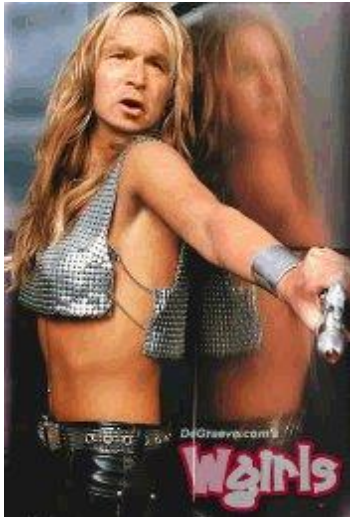
Anti-war demonstrations provided an opportunity for political slogans to be seen by a vast audience. However, to ensure that

the audience was as wide as possible many were subsequently placed on the internet, or circulated via email. All three images play on the President's name aiming to undermine his credibility, without necessarily having to offer an



alternative ideology, although by challenging the President they open a potential space for an alternative. The ridicule has not been limited to his name, his appearance, and intelligence has also been questioned in an attempt to further undermine his position.

The space created by these images is filled by artists such as Clay Bennet. His [checklist for invasion](#) was circulated via email as well as being available on his website. The Propaganda Remix Project attempted to further



emphasise what they felt was the warmongering nature of George Bush with their [poster](#) depicting a number of countries that he could potentially want to threaten under the umbrella of the Axis of evil.

Despite being united in their opposition to war and George Bush there are clear divides amongst the anti-war / anti-Bush movement. This is in line with Gramsci's argument that groups with different ideology may unite to form an alliance against the hegemonic block.

One group argues that moves by

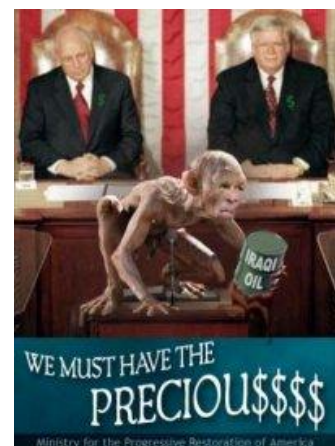
President Bush toward war are driven by oil interests.

Hazzamon returns, as many have, to the theme of the Mastercard advert, while others have preferred to use a massive cinema success to push the link to the desire for Oil. Lord of the Rings also features in images produced by a group who believe that war is hubris on the part of George Bush.



They see him as "a wanton child of warmography," the Worried Shrimp argues that the President is "a puppet of the powerful defense industry" but does not exclude oil as an additional motive.<sup>[13]</sup> This eclectic sentiment is rarely expressed in one image as artists attempt to maintain a simple

cartoon, however, there are times when multiple criticisms of President Bush have been used [simultaneously](#). The vehemence with which the feeling is held is demonstrated through the images of the President on Air Force One. The placement of [devil horns](#) on George Bush clearly transmits the ideology, without having to make any sort of argument. This is particularly pertinent as the photograph from which this is an adaption appears was flipped from the original before release to the press. According to Ann Compton of ABC this was done to improve the styling of the photograph



which was later used as part of the [Republican fund raising](#) campaign, a cause of much consternation within some sections of the media.

The worried shrimp's alternative view of the President looking out of the [window on Air Force One](#) is also an adaptation of a photograph released to the press. The [original](#) was taken of the President surveying the devastation caused by the forest fires in Arizona in June 2002. The Worried Shrimp, a veteran of the Vietnam conflict, driven by the conviction that President Bush "hasn't got a clue about war. About putting it ALL ON THE LINE" makes the easily accessible argument that "a nuclear strike is an option bush would embrace." Through this cartoon the Worried Shrimp "tried to create an image that reveals bush's future and ours," but perhaps there is a more subtle interpretation of these two pictures, when seen together.<sup>[14]</sup> The [flipped photograph](#) taken on September 11 was intended to show President Bush as caring for his nation, the Worried Shrimp's adaptation of the Arizona photograph could, although perhaps unintentionally, be read as showing the flip side of this caring image. Whichever reading is apparent to the recipient, it is clear that the images are derogatory and aimed at discrediting the President, his policies, or both.

Some attempts to attack US Government policy use 'information' which initially appears credible in an attempt to alter opinion. However, this information is neither always accurate nor distributed by the organisation the author purports to represent. [This presentation](#) claims to be "Part of the material for the course: Models and Natural Resources Management" 1", Milan Technical University" and links to; [www.Emergency.it](http://www.Emergency.it) – the website of Emergency, an Italian organisation that focuses "its humanitarian activities on treatment and rehabilitation of victims of antipersonnel mines". This provides a persuasive argument that could influence the opinion of some individuals, given that many people will not follow the link they will believe that the information is credible, particularly as it purports to form part of a University course. As such, presentations like this represent another weapon, although without the benefit of humour to attract those surfing the net for leisure, in the struggle for influence, despite Emergency denying authorship on the English version of their website. Emergency in a statement released at the time the email was first circulated "stress that such approximate and untruthful documents just contribute to spread misinformation" and encourage anyone who had received the presentation as an attachment to an email not to distribute it further. This example reflects the more broad

issue of credibility and authenticity on the internet. Jakob Nielsen, of [Nielsen Norman Group](#), in emphasising the benefits of web-based news coverage, noted that “[the web excels at providing summaries, overviews, and key facts](#)” due to “the constraints of the web, imposed by download times and impatient surfers.” The clear indication is that interaction with a source on the internet is, for many, brief and as such the any ideological stance must be transmitted quickly. The transmission of argument and opinion could therefore, rely less on the credibility of the initial source and more on the resonance of that argument with the individual recipient, as many will not take the time to confirm the authenticity of the source. The desire for credible information causes many to stick to sites, or organisations, with which they are familiar, for example [CNN](#), the [BBC](#), or for those wanting a less government dominated news service; the [Independent Media Center](#). Each has their own political stance which allows individuals to become accustomed to the content. However, politically motivated material distributed by email does not allow the recipient to maintain this tight focus and presents a clear challenge to official interpretations of global events. The hegemonic group can no longer use the power of the State in an attempt to ensure that the official interpretations of events are those that are disseminated to the population, including groups that would normally only seek coverage from the major news organisations.

Many individuals, including The Worried Shrimp, working either alone or in small collaborations that transmit the ideology of an anti-war or anti-Bush movement appear to have gained supremacy on the internet over the pro-Bush intellectuals in terms of the quantity their production and general circulation, particularly in the realm of political



humour and satire. However, there is as yet no evidence that this struggle waged on the internet has become the pivotal decision making medium within our society. What is certain is that the struggle is not being waged only in predominantly English speaking countries.

For example the Dutch are engaged in their



own ideological struggle, the caption reads “Taliban suicide mission misses target,” while material ridiculing George Bush and Tony Blair aired on SVT, the Swedish Television Network, is now available to all via the [internet](#), and circulating on email within Britain.

A debate exists over the first war on Television, Ted Smith has argued that the Gulf war was “[The World’s First TV War](#),” but [Newton N. Minow](#) prefers the phrase the “[first made-for-TV war](#),” pointing to the coverage of the Vietnam conflict. Which ever eventually gets to lay claim to the title, the ideological battleground may have already moved on. While [Wired magazine](#) has already claimed that the “struggle engulfing the provinces of the former Yugoslavia is the first Internet war,” the first true ideological clash to be dominated by the internet is still to come. The political cartoon artists have taken the first steps in this cultural space, engaging websites, weblogs and the power of email in their ideologically driven struggle. However, the internet is still for many people an undiscovered medium, and for those familiar with its use still not a dominant force of ideological persuasion. Until the internet can gain credibility as a medium for serious ideological conflict, the newspapers, radio and television will remain the media of choice for the vast majority of the population.

The internet can provide the space where the persuasiveness of a position may become the sole factor in an ideological struggle, as the coercive powers of the State are severely inhibited and the need for vast financial resources to buy air time, or other forms of publicity, is removed. However, the existence of free ideological conflict, if it is indeed possible, is still in the future. Even if the internet becomes the dominant media for persuasion, and remains uncontrolled by the powers of the State, individuals will still live in the real world. Unless there are radical and at the moment seemingly unlikely changes to the way we live, if their political decisions are made through arguments presented in cyberspace they will still relate to initiatives based in reality, allowing for a continuation of the balance of persuasion and coercion, as observed by Gramsci. It will just be that the persuasion is coming from a new group of Intellectuals.

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- [5] For the attempt to sell America see Scott Lucas & James D Boys ["With Us or Against Us: Cultural Projection and US Foreign Policy After 9-11"](#), 49<sup>th</sup> Parallel, 10, Spring, 2003
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