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The Wealth of Networks

How Social Production Transforms Markets and Freedom

Yochai Benkler

Yale University Press
New Haven and London

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STRANGE FRUIT
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Chapter 8 Cultural Freedom: A Culture Both Plastic and Critical

Gone with the Wind

There was a land of Cavaliers
and Cotton Fields called the
Old South. Here in this
pretty world, Gallantry took
its last bow. Here was the
last ever to be seen of
Knights and their Ladies
Fair, of Master and of Slave.
Look for it only in books,
for it is no more than a
dream remembered, a Civili-
zation gone with the wind.

—MGM (1939) film
adaptation of Margaret
Mitchell's novel (1936)

Strange Fruit

Southern trees bear strange fruit,
Blood on the leaves and blood at the root,
Black bodies swinging in the southern
breeze,
Strange fruit hanging from the poplar trees.

Pastoral scene of the gallant south,
The bulging eyes and the twisted mouth,
Scent of magnolias, sweet and fresh,
Then the sudden smell of burning flesh.

Here is the fruit for the crows to pluck,
For the rain to gather, for the wind to
suck,
For the sun to rot, for the trees to drop,
Here is a strange and bitter crop.

—Billie Holiday (1939) from lyrics by
Abel Meeropol (1937)

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In 1939, *Gone with the Wind* reaped seven Oscars, while Billie Holiday's song reached number 16 on the charts, even though Columbia Records refused to release it: Holiday had to record it with a small company that was run out of a storefront in midtown Manhattan. On the eve of the second reconstruction era, which was to overhaul the legal framework of race relations over the two decades beginning with the desegregation of the armed forces in the late 1940s and culminating with the civil rights acts passed between 1964–1968, the two sides of the debate over desegregation and the legacy of slavery were minting new icons through which to express their most basic beliefs about the South and its peculiar institutions. As the following three decades unfolded and the South was gradually forced to change its ways, the cultural domain continued to work out the meaning of race relations in the United States and the history of slavery. The actual slogging of regulation of discrimination, implementation of desegregation and later affirmative action, and the more local politics of hiring and firing were punctuated throughout this period by salient iconic retellings of the stories of race relations in the United States, from *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner?* to *Roots*. The point of this chapter, however, is not to discuss race relations, but to understand culture and cultural production in terms of political theory. *Gone with the Wind* and *Strange Fruit* or *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner?* offer us intuitively accessible instances of a much broader and more basic characteristic of human understanding and social relations. Culture, shared meaning, and symbols are how we construct our views of life across a wide range of domains—personal, political, and social. How culture is produced is therefore an essential ingredient in structuring how freedom and justice are perceived, conceived, and pursued. In the twentieth century, Hollywood and the recording industry came to play a very large role in this domain. The networked information economy now seems poised to attenuate that role in favor of a more participatory and transparent cultural production system.

Cultural freedom occupies a position that relates to both political freedom and individual autonomy, but is synonymous with neither. The root of its importance is that none of us exist outside of culture. As individuals and as political actors, we understand the world we occupy, evaluate it, and act in it from within a set of understandings and frames of meaning and reference that we share with others. What institutions and decisions are considered "legitimate" and worthy of compliance or participation; what courses of

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action are attractive; what forms of interaction with others are considered appropriate—these are all understandings negotiated from within a set of shared frames of meaning. How those frames of meaning are shaped and by whom become central components of the structure of freedom for those individuals and societies that inhabit it and are inhabited by it. They define the public sphere in a much broader sense than we considered in the prior chapters.

The networked information economy makes it possible to reshape both the "who" and the "how" of cultural production relative to cultural production in the twentieth century. It adds to the centralized, market-oriented production system a new framework of radically decentralized individual and cooperative nonmarket production. It thereby affects the ability of individuals and groups to participate in the production of the cultural tools and frameworks of human understanding and discourse. It affects the way we, as individuals and members of social and political clusters, interact with culture, and through it with each other. It makes culture more transparent to its inhabitants. It makes the process of cultural production more participatory, in the sense that more of those who live within a culture can actively participate in its creation. We are seeing the possibility of an emergence of a new popular culture, produced on the folk-culture model and inhabited actively, rather than passively consumed by the masses. Through these twin characteristics—transparency and participation—the networked information economy also creates greater space for critical evaluation of cultural materials and tools. The practice of producing culture makes us all more sophisticated readers, viewers, and listeners, as well as more engaged makers.

Throughout the twentieth century, the making of widely shared images and symbols was a concentrated practice that went through the filters of Hollywood and the recording industry. The radically declining costs of manipulating video and still images, audio, and text have, however, made culturally embedded criticism and broad participation in the making of meaning much more feasible than in the past. Anyone with a personal computer can cut and mix files, make their own files, and publish them to a global audience. This is not to say that cultural bricolage, playfulness, and criticism did not exist before. One can go to the avant-garde movement, but equally well to African-Brazilian culture or to Our Lady of Guadalupe to find them. Even with regard to television, that most passive of electronic media, John Fiske argued under the rubric of "semiotic democracy" that viewers engage

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in creative play and meaning making around the TV shows they watch. However, the technical characteristics of digital information technology, the economics of networked information production, and the social practices of networked discourse qualitatively change the role individuals can play in cultural production.

The practical capacity individuals and noncommercial actors have to use and manipulate cultural artifacts today, playfully or critically, far outstrips anything possible in television, film, or recorded music, as these were organized throughout the twentieth century. The diversity of cultural moves and statements that results from these new opportunities for creativity vastly increases the range of cultural elements accessible to any individual. Our ability, therefore, to navigate the cultural environment and make it our own, both through creation and through active selection and attention, has increased to the point of making a qualitative difference. In the academic law literature, Niva Elkin Koren wrote early about the potential democratization of "meaning making processes," William Fisher about "semiotic democracy," and Jack Balkin about a "democratic culture." Lessig has explored the generative capacity of the freedom to create culture, its contribution to creativity itself. These efforts revolve around the idea that there is something normatively attractive, from the perspective of "democracy" as a liberal value, about the fact that anyone, using widely available equipment, can take from the existing cultural universe more or less whatever they want, cut it, paste it, mix it, and make it their own—equally well expressing their adoration as their disgust, their embrace of certain images as their rejection of them.

Building on this work, this chapter seeks to do three things: First, I claim that the modalities of cultural production and exchange are a proper subject for normative evaluation within a broad range of liberal political theory. Culture is a social-psychological-cognitive fact of human existence. Ignoring it, as rights-based and utilitarian versions of liberalism tend to do, disables political theory from commenting on central characteristics of a society and its institutional frameworks. Analyzing the attractiveness of any given political institutional system without considering how it affects cultural production, and through it the production of the basic frames of meaning through which individual and collective self-determination functions, leaves a large hole in our analysis. Liberal political theory needs a theory of culture and agency that is viscous enough to matter normatively, but loose enough to give its core foci—the individual and the political system—room to be ef-

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fective independently, not as a mere expression or extension of culture. Second, I argue that cultural production in the form of the networked information economy offers individuals a greater participatory role in making the culture they occupy, and makes this culture more transparent to its inhabitants. This descriptive part occupies much of the chapter. Third, I suggest the relatively straightforward conclusion of the prior two observations. From the perspective of liberal political theory, the kind of open, participatory, transparent folk culture that is emerging in the networked environment is normatively more attractive than was the industrial cultural production system typified by Hollywood and the recording industry.

A nine-year-old girl searching Google for Barbie will quite quickly find links to AdiosBarbie.com, to the Barbie Liberation Organization (BLO), and to other, similarly critical sites interspersed among those dedicated to selling and playing with the doll. The contested nature of the doll becomes publicly and everywhere apparent, liberated from the confines of feminist-criticism symposia and undergraduate courses. This simple Web search represents both of the core contributions of the networked information economy. First, from the perspective of the searching girl, it represents a new transparency of cultural symbols. Second, from the perspective of the participants in AdiosBarbie or the BLO, the girl's use of their site completes their own quest to participate in making the cultural meaning of Barbie. The networked information environment provides an outlet for contrary expression and a medium for shaking what we accept as cultural baseline assumptions. Its radically decentralized production modes provide greater freedom to participate effectively in defining the cultural symbols of our day. These characteristics make the networked environment attractive from the perspectives of both personal freedom of expression and an engaged and self-aware political discourse.

We cannot, however, take for granted that the technological capacity to participate in the cultural conversation, to mix and make our own, will translate into the freedom to do so. The practices of cultural and countercultural creation are at the very core of the battle over the institutional ecology of the digital environment. The tension is perhaps not new or unique to the Internet, but its salience is now greater. The makers of the 1970s comic strip *Air Pirates* already found their comics confiscated when they portrayed Mickey and Minnie and Donald and Daisy in various compromising countercultural postures. Now, the ever-increasing scope and ex-

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panse of copyright law and associated regulatory mechanisms, on the one hand, and of individual and collective nonmarket creativity, on the other hand, have heightened the conflict between cultural freedom and the regulatory framework on which the industrial cultural production system depends. As Lessig, Jessica Litman, and Siva Vaidhyanathan have each portrayed elegantly and in detail, the copyright industries have on many dimensions persuaded both Congress and courts that individual, nonmarket creativity using the cultural outputs of the industrial information economy is to be prohibited. As we stand today, freedom to play with the cultural environment is nonetheless preserved in the teeth of the legal constraints, because of the high costs of enforcement, on the one hand, and the ubiquity and low cost of the means to engage in creative cultural bricolage, on the other hand. These social, institutional, and technical facts still leave us with quite a bit of unauthorized creative expression. These facts, however, are contingent and fragile. Chapter 11 outlines in some detail the long trend toward the creation of ever-stronger legal regulation of cultural production, and in particular, the enclosure movement that began in the 1970s and gained steam in the mid-1990s. A series of seemingly discrete regulatory moves threatens the emerging networked folk culture. Ranging from judicial interpretations of copyright law to efforts to regulate the hardware and software of the networked environment, we are seeing a series of efforts to restrict nonmarket use of twentieth-century cultural materials in order to preserve the business models of Hollywood and the recording industry. These regulatory efforts threaten the freedom to participate in twenty-first-century cultural production, because current creation requires taking and mixing the twentieth-century cultural materials that make up who we are as culturally embedded beings. Here, however, I focus on explaining how cultural participation maps onto the project of liberal political theory, and why the emerging cultural practices should be seen as attractive within that normative framework. I leave development of the policy implications to part III.

CULTURAL FREEDOM IN LIBERAL POLITICAL THEORY

Utilitarian and rights-based liberal political theories have an awkward relationship to culture. Both major strains of liberal theory make a certain set of assumptions about the autonomous individuals with which they are concerned. Individuals are assumed to be rational and knowledgeable, at least

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about what is good for them. They are conceived of as possessing a capacity for reason and a set of preferences prior to engagement with others. Political theory then proceeds to concern itself with political structures that respect the autonomy of individuals with such characteristics. In the political domain, this conception of the individual is easiest to see in pluralist theories, which require institutions for collective decision making that clear what are treated as already-formed preferences of individuals or voluntary groupings.

Culture represents a mysterious category for these types of liberal political theories. It is difficult to specify how it functions in terms readily amenable to a conception of individuals whose rationality and preferences for their own good are treated as though they preexist and are independent of society. A concept of culture requires some commonly held meaning among these individuals. Even the simplest intuitive conception of what culture might mean would treat this common frame of meaning as the result of social processes that preexist any individual, and partially structure what it is that individuals bring to the table as they negotiate their lives together, in society or in a polity. Inhabiting a culture is a precondition to any interpretation of what is at stake in any communicative exchange among individuals. A partly subconscious, lifelong dynamic social process of becoming and changing as a cultural being is difficult to fold into a collective decision-making model that focuses on designing a discursive platform for individuated discrete participants who are the bearers of political will. It is easier to model respect for an individual's will when one adopts a view of that will as independent, stable, and purely internally generated. It is harder to do so when one conceives of that individual will as already in some unspecified degree rooted in exchange with others about what an individual is to value and prefer.

Culture has, of course, been incorporated into political theory as a central part of the critique of liberalism. The politics of culture have been a staple of critical theory since Marx first wrote that "Religion . . . is the opium of the people" and that "to call on them to give up their illusions about their condition is to call on them to give up a condition that requires illusions."[1] The twentieth century saw a wide array of critique, from cultural Marxism to poststructuralism and postmodernism. However, much of mainstream liberal political theory has chosen to ignore, rather than respond and adapt to, these critiques. In *Political Liberalism*, for example, Rawls acknowledges "the fact" of reasonable pluralism—of groups that persistently and reasonably hold competing comprehensive doctrines—and aims for political pluralism as a mode of managing the irreconcilable differences. This leaves the for-

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mation of the comprehensive doctrine and the systems of belief within which it is rendered "reasonable" a black box to liberal theory. This may be an adequate strategy for analyzing the structure of formal political institutions at the broadest level of abstraction. However, it disables liberal political theory from dealing with more fine-grained questions of policy that act within the black box.

As a practical matter, treating culture as a black box disables a political theory as a mechanism for diagnosing the actual conditions of life in a society in terms of its own political values. It does so in precisely the same way that a formal conception of autonomy disables those who hold it from diagnosing the conditions of autonomy in practical life. Imagine for a moment that we had received a revelation that a crude version of Antonio Gramsci's hegemony theory was perfectly correct as a matter of descriptive sociology. Ruling classes do, in fact, consciously and successfully manipulate the culture in order to make the oppressed classes compliant. It would be difficult, then, to continue to justify holding a position about political institutions, or autonomy, that treated the question of how culture, generally, or even the narrow subset of reasonably held comprehensive doctrines like religion, are made, as a black box. It would be difficult to defend respect for autonomous choices as respect for an individual's will, if an objective observer could point to a social process, external to the individual and acting upon him or her, as the cause of the individual holding that will. It would be difficult to focus one's political design imperatives on public processes that allow people to express their beliefs and preferences, argue about them, and ultimately vote on them, if it is descriptively correct that those beliefs and preferences are themselves the product of manipulation of some groups by others.

The point is not, of course, that Gramsci was descriptively right or that any of the broad range of critical theories of culture is correct as a descriptive matter. It is that liberal theories that ignore culture are rendered incapable of answering some questions that arise in the real world and have real implications for individuals and polities. There is a range of sociological, psychological, or linguistic descriptions that could characterize the culture of a society as more or less in accord with the concern of liberalism with individual and collective self-determination. Some such descriptive theory of culture can provide us with enough purchase on the role of culture to diagnose the attractiveness of a cultural production system from a political-theory perspective. It does not require that liberal theory abandon individuals

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as the bearers of the claims of political morality. It does not require that liberal political theory refocus on culture as opposed to formal political institutions. It does require, however, that liberal theory at least be able to diagnose different conditions in the practical cultural life of a society as more or less attractive from the perspective of liberal political theory.

The efforts of deliberative liberal theories to account for culture offer the most obvious source of such an insight. These political theories have worked to develop a conception of culture and its relationship to liberalism precisely because at a minimum, they require mutual intelligibility across individuals, which cannot adequately be explained without some conception of culture. In Jurgen Habermas's work, culture plays the role of a basis for mutual intelligibility. As the basis for "interpersonal intelligibility," we see culture playing such a role in the work of Bruce Ackerman, who speaks of acculturation as the necessary condition to liberal dialogue. "Cultural coherence" is something he sees children requiring as a precondition to becoming liberal citizens: it allows them to "Talk" and defend their claims in terms without which there can be no liberal conversation.[2] Michael Walzer argues that, "in matters of morality, argument is simply the appeal to common meanings."[3] Will Kymlicka claims that for individual autonomy, "freedom involves making choices amongst various options, and our societal culture not only provides these options, but makes them meaningful to us." A societal culture, in turn, is a "shared vocabulary of tradition and convention" that is "embodied in social life[,] institutionally embodied—in schools, media, economy, government, etc."[4] Common meanings in all these frameworks must mean more than simple comprehension of the words of another. It provides a common baseline, which is not itself at that moment the subject of conversation or inquiry, but forms the background on which conversation and inquiry take place. Habermas's definition of lifeworld as "background knowledge," for example, is a crisp rendering of culture in this role:

> the lifeworld embraces us as an unmediated certainty, out of whose immediate proximity we live and speak. This all-penetrating, yet latent and unnoticed presence of the background of communicative action can be described as a more intense, yet deficient, form of knowledge and ability. To begin with, we make use of this knowledge involuntarily, without reflectively knowing *that* we possess it at all. What enables background knowledge to acquire absolute certainty in this way, and even augments its epistemic quality from a subjective standpoint, is precisely the property that robs it of a constitutive feature of knowledge: we make use of

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> such knowledge without the awareness that it *could* be false. Insofar as all knowledge is fallible and is known to be such, background knowledge does not represent knowledge at all, in a strict sense. As background knowledge, it lacks the possibility of being challenged, that is, of being raised to the level of criticizable validity claims. One can do this only by converting it from a resource into a topic of discussion, at which point—just when it is thematized—it no longer functions as a lifeworld background but rather *disintegrates* in its background modality.[5]

In other words, our understanding of meaning—how we are, how others are, what ought to be—are in some significant portion unexamined assumptions that we share with others, and to which we appeal as we engage in communication with them. This does not mean that culture is a version of false consciousness. It does not mean that background knowledge cannot be examined rationally or otherwise undermines the very possibility or coherence of a liberal individual or polity. It does mean, however, that at any given time, in any given context, there will be some set of historically contingent beliefs, attitudes, and social and psychological conditions that will in the normal course remain unexamined, and form the unexamined foundation of conversation. Culture is revisable through critical examination, at which point it ceases to be "common knowledge" and becomes a contested assumption. Nevertheless, some body of unexamined common knowledge is necessary for us to have an intelligible conversation that does not constantly go around in circles, challenging the assumptions on whichever conversational move is made.

Culture, in this framework, is not destiny. It does not predetermine who we are, or what we can become or do, nor is it a fixed artifact. It is the product of a dynamic process of engagement among those who make up a culture. It is a frame of meaning from within which we must inevitably function and speak to each other, and whose terms, constraints, and affordances we always negotiate. There is no point outside of culture from which to do otherwise. An old Yiddish folktale tells of a naïve rabbi who, for safekeeping, put a ten-ruble note inside his copy of the Torah, at the page of the commandment, "thou shalt not steal." That same night, a thief stole into the rabbi's home, took the ten-ruble note, and left a five-ruble note in its place, at the page of the commandment, "thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself." The rabbi and the thief share a common cultural framework (as do we, across the cultural divide), through which their various actions can be understood; indeed, without which their actions would be unintelligible.

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The story offers a theory of culture, power, and freedom that is more congenial to liberal political theory than critical theories, and yet provides a conception of the role of culture in human relations that provides enough friction, or viscosity, to allow meaning making in culture to play a role in the core concerns of liberal political theory. Their actions are part strategic and part communicative—that is to say, to some extent they seek to force an outcome, and to some extent they seek to engage the other in a conversation in order to achieve a commonly accepted outcome. The rabbi places the ten-ruble note in the Bible in order to impress upon the putative thief that he should leave the money where it is. He cannot exert force on the thief by locking the money up in a safe because he does not own one. Instead, he calls upon a shared understanding and a claim of authority within the governed society to persuade the thief. The thief, to the contrary, could have physically taken the ten-ruble note without replacing it, but he does not. He engages the rabbi in the same conversation. In part, he justifies his claim to five rubles. In part, he resists the authority of the rabbi—not by rejecting the culture that renders the rabbi a privileged expert, but by playing the game of Talmudic disputation. There is a price, though, for participating in the conversation. The thief must leave the five-ruble note; he cannot take the whole amount.

In this story, culture is open to interpretation and manipulation, but not infinitely so. Some moves may be valid within a cultural framework and alter it; others simply will not. The practical force of culture, on the other hand, is not brute force. It cannot force an outcome, but it can exert a real pull on the range of behaviors that people will seriously consider undertaking, both as individuals and as polities. The storyteller relies on the listener's cultural understanding about the limits of argument, or communicative action. The story exploits the open texture of culture, and the listener's shared cultural belief that stealing is an act of force, not a claim of justice; that those who engage in it do not conceive of themselves as engaged in legitimate defensible acts. The rabbi was naïve to begin with, but the thief's disputation is inconsistent with our sense of the nature of the act of stealing in exactly the same way that the rabbi's was, but inversely. The thief, the rabbi, and the storyteller participate in making, and altering, the meaning of the commandments.

Culture changes through the actions of individuals in the cultural context. Beliefs, claims, communicative moves that have one meaning before an in-

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tervention may begin to shift in their meaning as a result of other moves, made by other participants in the same cultural milieu. One need not adopt any given fully fledged meme theory of culture—like Richard Dawkins's, or Balkin's political adaptation of it as a theory of ideology—to accept that culture is created through communication among human beings, that it exerts some force on what they can say to each other and how it will be received, and that the parameters of a culture as a platform for making meaning in interaction among human beings change over time with use. How cultural moves are made, by whom, and with what degree of perfect replication or subtle (and not so subtle) change, become important elements in determining the rate and direction of cultural change. These changes, over time, alter the platform individuals must use to make sense of the world they occupy, and for participants in conversation to be able to make intelligible communications to each other about the world they share and where it can and ought to go. Culture so understood is a social fact about particular sets of human beings in historical context. As a social fact, it constrains and facilitates the development, expression, and questioning of beliefs and positions. Whether and how Darwinism should be taught in public schools, for example, is a live political question in vast regions of the United States, and is played out as a debate over whether evolution is "merely a theory." Whether racial segregation should be practiced in these schools is no longer a viable or even conceivable political agenda. The difference between Darwinism and the undesirability of racial segregation is not that one is scientifically true and the other is not. The difference is that the former is not part of the "common knowledge" of a large section of society, whereas the latter is, in a way that no longer requires proof by detailed sociological and psychological studies of the type cited by the Supreme Court in support of its holding, in *Brown v. Board of Education*, that segregation in education was inherently unequal.

If culture is indeed part of how we form a shared sense of unexamined common knowledge, it plays a significant role in framing the meaning of the state of the world, the availability and desirability of choices, and the organization of discourse. The question of how culture is framed (and through it, meaning and the baseline conversational moves) then becomes germane to a liberal political theory. Between the Scylla of a fixed culture (with hierarchical, concentrated power to control its development and interpretation) and the Charybdis of a perfectly open culture (where nothing

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is fixed and everything is up for grabs, offering no anchor for meaning and mutual intelligibility), there is a wide range of practical social and economic arrangements around the production and use of culture. In evaluating the attractiveness of various arrangements from the perspective of liberal theory, we come to an already familiar trade-off, and an already familiar answer. As in the case of autonomy and political discourse, a greater ability of individuals to participate in the creation of the cultural meaning of the world they occupy is attractive from the perspective of the liberal commitments to individual freedom and democratic participation. As in both areas that we have already considered, a Babel objection appears: Too much freedom to challenge and remake our own cultural environment will lead to a lack of shared meaning. As in those two cases, however, the fears of too active a community of meaning making are likely exaggerated. Loosening the dominant power of Hollywood and television over contemporary culture is likely to represent an incremental improvement, from the perspective of liberal political commitments. It will lead to a greater transparency of culture, and therefore a greater capacity for critical reflection, and it will provide more opportunities for participating in the creation of culture, for interpolating individual glosses on it, and for creating shared variations on common themes.

THE TRANSPARENCY OF INTERNET CULTURE

If you run a search for "Barbie" on three separate search engines—Google, Overture, and Yahoo!—you will get quite different results. Table 8.1 lists these results in the order in which they appear on each search engine. Overture is a search engine that sells placement to the parties who are being searched. Hits on this search engine are therefore ranked based on whoever paid Overture the most in order to be placed highly in response to a query. On this list, none of the top ten results represent anything other than sales-related Barbie sites. Critical sites begin to appear only around the twenty-fifth result, presumably after all paying clients have been served. Google, as we already know, uses a radically decentralized mechanism for assigning relevance. It counts how many sites on the Web have linked to a particular site that has the search term in it, and ranks the search results by placing a site with a high number of incoming links above a site with a low number of incoming links. In effect, each Web site publisher "votes" for a site's

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Table 8.1: Results for "Barbie"—Google versus Overture and Yahoo!

Google	*Overture*	*Yahoo!*
Barbie.com (Mattel's site)	Barbie at Amazon.com	Barbie.com
Barbie Collector: Official Mattel Web site for hobbyists and collectors	Toys and Leisure at QVC—Barbie	*Barbie Bazaar* Magazine
AdiosBarbie.com: A Body Image for Every Body (site created by women critical of Barbie's projected body image)	Barbie on Sale at KBToys	Barbie Collector
Barbie Bazaar Magazine (Barbie collectible news and Information)	Target.com: Barbies	My Scene.com
If You Were a Barbie, Which Messed Up Version Would You Be?	Barbie: Best prices and selection (bizrate.com)	EverythingGirl.com
Visible Barbie Project (macabre images of Barbie sliced as though in a science project)	Barbies, New and Pre-owned at NetDoll	Barbie History (fan-type history, mostly when various dolls were released)
Barbie: The Image of Us All (1995 undergraduate paper about Barbie's cultural history)	Barbies—compare prices (nextag.com)	Mattel, Inc.
Andigraph.free.fr (Barbie and Ken sex animation)	Barbie Toys (complete line of Barbie electronics online)	Spatula Jackson's Barbies (pictures of Barbie as various countercultural images).
Suicide bomber Barbie (Barbie with explosives strapped to waist)	Barbie Party supplies	Barbie! (fan site)
Barbies (Barbie dressed and painted as countercultural images)	Barbie and her accessories online	The Distorted Barbie

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relevance by linking to it, and Google aggregates these votes and renders them on their results page as higher ranking. The little girl who searches for Barbie on Google will encounter a culturally contested figure. The same girl, searching on Overture, will encounter a commodity toy. In each case, the underlying efforts of Mattel, the producer of Barbie, have not changed. What is different is that in an environment where relevance is measured in non-market action—placing a link to a Web site because you deem it relevant to whatever you are doing with your Web site—as opposed to in dollars, Barbie has become a more transparent cultural object. It is easier for the little girl to see that the doll is not only a toy, not only a symbol of beauty and glamour, but also a symbol of how norms of female beauty in our society can be oppressive to women and girls. The transparency does not force the girl to choose one meaning of Barbie or another. It does, however, render transparent that Barbie can have multiple meanings and that choosing meanings is a matter of political concern for some set of people who coinhabit this culture. Yahoo! occupies something of a middle ground—its algorithm does link to two of the critical sites among the top ten, and within the top twenty, identifies most of the sites that appear on Google's top ten that are not related to sales or promotion.

A similar phenomenon repeats itself in the context of explicit efforts to define Barbie—encyclopedias. There are, as of this writing, six general-interest online encyclopedias that are reasonably accessible on the Internet—that is to say, can be found with reasonable ease by looking at major search engines, sites that focus on education and parenting, and similar techniques. Five are commercial, and one is a quintessential commons-based peer-production project—*Wikipedia*. Of the five commercial encyclopedias, only one is available at no charge, the *Columbia Encyclopedia*, which is packaged in two primary forms—as encyclopedia.com and as part of Bartleby.com.[6] The other four—*Britannica*, Microsoft's *Encarta*, the *World Book*, and *Grolier's Online Encyclopedia*—charge various subscription rates that range around fifty to sixty dollars a year. The *Columbia Encyclopedia* includes no reference to Barbie, the doll. The *World Book* has no "Barbie" entry, but does include a reference to Barbie as part of a fairly substantial article on "Dolls." The only information that is given is that the doll was introduced in 1959, that she has a large wardrobe, and in a different place, that dark-skinned Barbies were introduced in the 1980s. The article concludes with a guide of about three hundred words to good doll-collecting practices. Mi-

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crosoft's *Encarta* also includes Barbie in the article on "Doll," but provides a brief separate definition as well, which replicates the *World Book* information in slightly different form: 1959, large wardrobe, and introduction of dark-skinned Barbies. The online photograph available with the definition is of a brown-skinned, black-haired Barbie. *Grolier's Online*'s major general-purpose encyclopedia, *Americana*, also has no entry for Barbie, but makes reference to the doll as part of the article on dolls. Barbie is described as a revolutionary new doll, made to resemble a teenage fashion model as part of a trend to realism in dolls. *Grolier's Online* does, however, include a more specialized *American Studies* encyclopedia that has an article on Barbie. That article heavily emphasizes the number of dolls sold and their value, provides some description of the chronological history of the doll, and makes opaque references to Barbie's physique and her emphasis on consumption. While the encyclopedia includes bibliographic references to critical works about Barbie, the textual references to cultural critique or problems she raises are very slight and quite oblique.

Only two encyclopedias focus explicitly on Barbie's cultural meaning: *Britannica* and *Wikipedia*. The *Britannica* entry was written by M. G. Lord, a professional journalist who authored a book entitled *Forever Barbie: The Unauthorized Biography of a Real Doll*. It is a tightly written piece that underscores the critique of Barbie, both on body dimensions and its relationship to the body image of girls, and excessive consumerism. It also, however, makes clear the fact that Barbie was the first doll to give girls a play image that was not focused on nurturing and family roles, but was an independent, professional adult: playing roles such as airline pilot, astronaut, or presidential candidate. The article also provides brief references to the role of Barbie in a global market economy—its manufacture outside the United States, despite its marketing as an American cultural icon, and its manufacturer's early adoption of direct-to-children marketing. *Wikipedia* provides more or less all the information provided in the *Britannica* definition, including a reference to Lord's own book, and adds substantially more material from within Barbie lore itself and a detailed time line of the doll's history. It has a strong emphasis on the body image controversy, and emphasizes both the critique that Barbie encourages girls to focus on shallow consumption of fashion accessories, and that she represents an unattainable lifestyle for most girls who play with her. The very first version of the definition, posted January 3, 2003, included only a brief reference to a change in Barbie's waistline as a result of efforts by parents and anorexia groups

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concerned with the doll's impact on girls' nutrition. This remained the only reference to the critique of Barbie until December 15, 2003, when a user who was not logged in introduced a fairly roughly written section that emphasized both the body image concerns and the consumerism concerns with Barbie. During the same day, a number of regular contributors (that is, users with log-in names and their own talk pages) edited the new section and improved its language and flow, but kept the basic concepts intact. Three weeks later, on January 5, 2004, another regular user rewrote the section, reorganized the paragraphs so that the critique of Barbie's emphasis on high consumption was separated from the emphasis on Barbie's body dimensions, and also separated and clarified the qualifying claims that Barbie's independence and professional outfits may have had positive effects on girls' perception of possible life plans. This contributor also introduced a reference to the fact that the term "Barbie" is often used to denote a shallow or silly girl or woman. After that, with a change three weeks later from describing Barbie as available for most of her life only as "white Anglo-Saxon (and probably protestant)" to "white woman of apparently European descent" this part of the definition stabilized. As this description aims to make clear, *Wikipedia* makes the history of the evolution of the article entirely transparent. The software platform allows any reader to look at prior versions of the definition, to compare specific versions, and to read the "talk" pages—the pages where the participants discuss their definition and their thoughts about it.

The relative emphasis of Google and *Wikipedia*, on the one hand, and Overture, Yahoo!, and the commercial encyclopedias other than *Britannica*, on the other hand, is emblematic of a basic difference between markets and social conversations with regard to culture. If we focus on the role of culture as "common knowledge" or background knowledge, its relationship to the market—at least for theoretical economists—is exogenous. It can be taken as given and treated as "taste." In more practical business environments, culture is indeed a source of taste and demand, but it is not taken as exogenous. Culture, symbolism, and meaning, as they are tied with market-based goods, become a major focus of advertising and of demand management. No one who has been exposed to the advertising campaigns of Coca-Cola, Nike, or Apple Computers, as well as practically to any one of a broad range of advertising campaigns over the past few decades, can fail to see that these are not primarily a communication about the material characteristics or qualities of the products or services sold by the advertisers.

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They are about meaning. These campaigns try to invest the act of buying their products or services with a cultural meaning that they cultivate, manipulate, and try to generalize in the practices of the society in which they are advertising, precisely in order to shape taste. They offer an opportunity to generate rents, because the consumer has to have this company's shoe rather than that one, because that particular shoe makes the customer this kind of person rather than that kind—cool rather than stuffy, sophisticated rather than common. Neither the theoretical economists nor the marketing executives have any interest in rendering culture transparent or writable. Whether one treats culture as exogenous or as a domain for limiting the elasticity of demand for one's particular product, there is no impetus to make it easier for consumers to see through the cultural symbols, debate their significance, or make them their own. If there is business reason to do anything about culture, it is to try to shape the cultural meaning of an object or practice, in order to shape the demand for it, while keeping the role of culture hidden and assuring control over the careful cultural choreography of the symbols attached to the company. Indeed, in 1995, the U.S. Congress enacted a new kind of trademark law, the Federal Antidilution Act, which for the first time disconnects trademark protection from protecting consumers from confusion by knockoffs. The Antidilution Act of 1995 gives the owner of any famous mark—and only famous marks—protection from any use that dilutes the meaning that the brand owner has attached to its own mark. It can be entirely clear to consumers that a particular use does not come from the owner of the brand, and still, the owner has a right to prevent this use. While there is some constitutional free-speech protection for criticism, there is also a basic change in the understanding of trademark law—from a consumer protection law intended to assure that consumers can rely on the consistency of goods marked in a certain way, to a property right in controlling the meaning of symbols a company has successfully cultivated so that they are, in fact, famous. This legal change marks a major shift in the understanding of the role of law in assigning control for cultural meaning generated by market actors.

Unlike market production of culture, meaning making as a social, nonmarket practice has no similar systematic reason to accept meaning as it comes. Certainly, some social relations do. When girls play with dolls, collect them, or exhibit them, they are rarely engaged in reflection on the meaning of the dolls, just as fans of Scarlett O'Hara, of which a brief Internet search suggests there are many, are not usually engaged in critique of *Gone with the*

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Wind as much as in replication and adoption of its romantic themes. Plainly, however, some conversations we have with each other are about who we are, how we came to be who we are, and whether we view the answers we find to these questions as attractive or not. In other words, some social interactions do have room for examining culture as well as inhabiting it, for considering background knowledge for what it is, rather than taking it as a given input into the shape of demand or using it as a medium for managing meaning and demand. People often engage in conversations with each other precisely to understand themselves in the world, their relationship to others, and what makes them like and unlike those others. One major domain in which this formation of self- and group identity occurs is the adoption or rejection of, and inquiry into, cultural symbols and sources of meaning that will make a group cohere or splinter; that will make people like or unlike each other.

The distinction I draw here between market-based and nonmarket-based activities is purposefully overstated to clarify the basic structural differences between these two modes of organizing communications and the degree of transparency of culture they foster. As even the very simple story of how Barbie is defined in Internet communications demonstrates, practices are not usually as cleanly divided. Like the role of the elite newspapers in providing political coverage, discussed in chapter 6, some market-based efforts do provide transparency; indeed, their very market rationale pushes them to engage in a systematic effort to provide transparency. Google's strategy from the start has been to assume that what individuals are interested in is a reflection of what other individuals—who are interested in roughly the same area, but spend more time on it, that is, Web page authors—think is worthwhile. The company built its business model around rendering transparent what people and organizations that make their information available freely consider relevant. Occasionally, Google has had to deal with "search engine optimizers," who have advised companies on how to game its search engine to achieve a high ranking. Google has fought these optimizers; sometimes by outright blocking access to traffic that originates with them. In these cases, we see a technical competition between firms—the optimizers—whose interest is in capturing attention based on the interests of those who pay them, and a firm, Google, whose strategic choice is to render the distributed judgments of relevance on the Web more or less faithfully. There, the market incentive actually drives Google's investment affirmatively toward transparency. However, the market decision must be strategic, not tactical, for this

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to be the case. Fear of litigation has, for example, caused Google to bury links that threatened it with liability. The most prominent of these cases occurred when the Church of Scientology threatened to sue Google over presenting links to www.xenu.net, a site dedicated to criticizing scientology. Google initially removed the link. However, its strategic interest was brought to the fore by widespread criticism of its decision on the Internet, and the firm relented. A search for "Scientology" as of this writing reveals a wide range of sites, many critical of scientology, and xenu.net is the second link. A search for "scientology Google" will reveal many stories, not quite flattering either to Google or to the Church of Scientology, as the top links. We see similar diversity among the encyclopedias. *Britannica* offered as clear a presentation of the controversy over Barbie as *Wikipedia*. *Britannica* has built its reputation and business model on delivery of the knowledge and opinions of those in positions to claim authority in the name of high culture professional competence, and delivering that perspective to those who buy the encyclopedia precisely to gain access to that kind of knowledge base, judgment, and formal credibility. In both cases, the long-term business model of the companies calls for reflecting the views and insights of agents who are not themselves thoroughly within the market—whether they are academics who write articles for *Britannica*, or the many and diverse Web page owners on the Internet. In both cases, these business models lead to a much more transparent cultural representation than what Hollywood or Madison Avenue produce. Just as not all market-based organizations render culture opaque, not all nonmarket or social-relations-based conversations aim to explore and expose cultural assumptions. Social conversations can indeed be among the most highly deferential to cultural assumptions, and can repress critique more effectively and completely than market-based conversations. Whether in communities of unquestioning religious devotion or those that enforce strict egalitarian political correctness, we commonly see, in societies both traditional and contemporary, significant social pressures against challenging background cultural assumptions within social conversations. We have, for example, always had more cultural experimentation and fermentation in cities, where social ties are looser and communities can exercise less social control over questioning minds and conversation. Ubiquitous Internet communications expand something of the freedom of city parks and streets, but also the freedom of cafés and bars—commercial platforms for social interaction—so that it is available everywhere.

The claim I make here, as elsewhere throughout this book, is not that

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nonmarket production will, in fact, generally displace market production, or that such displacement is necessary to achieve the improvement in the degree of participation in cultural production and legibility. My claim is that the emergence of a substantial nonmarket alternative path for cultural conversation increases the degrees of freedom available to individuals and groups to engage in cultural production and exchange, and that doing so increases the transparency of culture to its inhabitants. It is a claim tied to the particular technological moment and its particular locus of occurrence—our networked communications environment. It is based on the fact that it is displacing the particular industrial form of information and cultural production of the twentieth century, with its heavy emphasis on consumption in mass markets. In this context, the emergence of a substantial sector of nonmarket production, and of peer production, or the emergence of individuals acting cooperatively as a major new source of defining widely transmissible statements and conversations about the meaning of the culture we share, makes culture substantially more transparent and available for reflection, and therefore for revision.

Two other dimensions are made very clear by the *Wikipedia* example. The first is the degree of self-consciousness that is feasible with open, conversation-based definition of culture that is itself rendered more transparent. The second is the degree to which the culture is writable, the degree to which individuals can participate in mixing and matching and making their own emphases, for themselves and for others, on the existing set of symbols. Fisher, for example, has used the term "semiotic democracy" to describe the potential embodied in the emerging openness of Internet culture to participation by users. The term originates from Fiske's *Television Culture* as a counterpoint to the claim that television was actually a purely one-way medium that only enacted culture on viewers. Instead, Fiske claimed that viewers resist these meanings, put them in their own contexts, use them in various ways, and subvert them to make their own meaning. However, much of this resistance is unstated, some of it unself-conscious. There are the acts of reception and interpretation, or of using images and sentences in different contexts of life than those depicted in the television program; but these acts are local, enacted within small-scale local cultures, and are not the result of a self-conscious conversation among users of the culture about its limits, its meanings, and its subversions. One of the phenomena we are beginning to observe on the Internet is an emerging culture of conversation about culture, which is both self-conscious and informed by linking or quoting from spe-

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cific reference points. The *Wikipedia* development of the definition of Barbie, its history, and the availability of a talk page alongside it for discussion about the definition, are an extreme version of self-conscious discussion about culture. The basic tools enabled by the Internet—cutting, pasting, rendering, annotating, and commenting—make active utilization and conscious discussion of cultural symbols and artifacts easier to create, sustain, and read more generally.

The flexibility with which cultural artifacts—meaning-carrying objects—can be rendered, preserved, and surrounded by different context and discussion makes it easy for anyone, anywhere, to make a self-conscious statement about culture. They enable what Balkin has called "glomming on"—taking that which is common cultural representation and reworking it into your own move in a cultural conversation.[7] The low cost of storage, and the ubiquitous possibility of connecting from any connection location to any storage space make any such statement persistent and available to others. The ease of commenting, linking, and writing to other locations of statements, in turn, increases the possibility of response and counterresponse. These conversations can then be found by others, and at least read if not contributed to. In other words, as with other, purposeful peer-produced projects like *Wikipedia*, the basic characteristics of the Internet in general and the World Wide Web in particular have made it possible for anyone, anywhere, for any reason to begin to contribute to an accretion of conversation about well-defined cultural objects or about cultural trends and characteristics generally. These conversations can persist across time and exist across distance, and are available for both active participation and passive reading by many people in many places. The result is, as we are already seeing it, the emergence of widely accessible, self-conscious conversation about the meaning of contemporary culture by those who inhabit it. This "writability" is also the second characteristic that the *Wikipedia* definition process makes very clear, and the second major change brought about by the networked information economy in the digital environment.

THE PLASTICITY OF INTERNET CULTURE: THE FUTURE OF HIGH-PRODUCTION-VALUE FOLK CULTURE

I have already described the phenomena of blogs, of individually created movies like *The Jedi Saga*, and of Second Life, the game platform where

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users have made all the story lines and all the objects, while the commercial provider created the tools and hosts the platform for their collective storytelling. We are seeing the broad emergence of business models that are aimed precisely at providing users with the tools to write, compose, film, and mix existing materials, and to publish, play, render, and distribute what we have made to others, everywhere. Blogger, for example, provides simple tools for online publication of written materials. Apple Computer offers a product called GarageBand, that lets users compose and play their own music. It includes a large library of prerecorded building blocks—different instruments, riffs, loops—and an interface that allows the user to mix, match, record and add their own, and produce their own musical composition and play it. Video-editing utilities, coupled with the easy malleability of digital video, enable people to make films—whether about their own lives or, as in the case of *The Jedi Saga*, of fantasies. The emerging phenomenon of Machinima—short movies that are made using game platforms—underscores how digital platforms can also become tools for creation in unintended ways. Creators use the 3-D rendering capabilities of an existing game, but use the game to stage a movie scene or video presentation, which they record as it is played out. This recording is then distributed on the Internet as a standalone short film. While many of these are still crude, the basic possibilities they present as modes of making movies is significant. Needless to say, not everyone is Mozart. Not everyone is even a reasonably talented musician, author, or filmmaker. Much of what can be and is done is not wildly creative, and much of it takes the form of Balkin's "glomming on": That is, users take existing popular culture, or otherwise professionally created culture, and perform it, sometimes with an effort toward fidelity to the professionals, but often with their own twists, making it their own in an immediate and unmediated way. However, just as learning how to read music and play an instrument can make one a better-informed listener, so too a ubiquitous practice of making cultural artifacts of all forms enables individuals in society to be better readers, listeners, and viewers of professionally produced culture, as well as contributors of our own statements into this mix of collective culture.

People have always created their own culture. Popular music did not begin with Elvis. There has always been a folk culture—of music, storytelling, and theater. What happened over the course of the twentieth century in advanced economies, and to a lesser extent but still substantially around the globe, is the displacement of folk culture by commercially produced mass popular

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culture. The role of the individuals and communities vis-à-vis cultural artifacts changed, from coproducers and replicators to passive consumers. The time frame where elders might tell stories, children might put on a show for the adults, or those gathered might sing songs came to be occupied by background music, from the radio or phonograph, or by television. We came to assume a certain level of "production values"—quality of sound and image, quality of rendering and staging—that are unattainable with our crude means and our relatively untrained voices or use of instruments. Not only time for local popular creation was displaced, therefore, but also a sense of what counted as engaging, delightful articulation of culture. In a now-classic article from 1937, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," Walter Benjamin authored one of the only instances of critical theory that took an optimistic view of the emergence of popular culture in the twentieth century as a potentially liberating turn. Benjamin's core claim was that with mechanical replication of art, the "aura" that used to attach to single works of art is dissipated. Benjamin saw this aura of unique works of art as reinforcing a distance between the masses and the representations of culture, reinforcing the perception of their weakness and distance from truly great things. He saw in mechanical reproducibility the possibility of bringing copies down to earth, to the hands of the masses, and reversing the sense of distance and relative weakness of the mass culture. What Benjamin did not yet see were the ways in which mechanical reproduction would insert a different kind of barrier between many dispersed individuals and the capacity to make culture. The barrier of production costs, production values, and the star system that came along with them, replaced the iconic role of the unique work of art with new, but equally high barriers to participation in making culture. It is precisely those barriers that the capabilities provided by digital media begin to erode. It is becoming feasible for users to cut and paste, "glom on," to existing cultural materials; to implement their intuitions, tastes, and expressions through media that render them with newly acceptable degrees of technical quality, and to distribute them among others, both near and far. As Hollywood begins to use more computer-generated special effects, but more important, whole films—2004 alone saw major releases like *Shrek 2*, *The Incredibles*, and *Polar Express*—and as the quality of widely available image-generation software and hardware improves, the production value gap between individual users or collections of users and the commercial-professional studios will decrease. As this book is completed in early 2005, nothing makes clearer the value of retelling basic stories through

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the prism of contemporary witty criticism of prevailing culture than do *Shrek 2* and *The Incredibles*, and, equally, nothing exposes the limits of purely technical, movie-star-centered quality than the lifelessness of *Polar Express*. As online games like Second Life provide users with new tools and platforms to tell and retell their own stories, or their own versions of well-trodden paths, as digital multimedia tools do the same for individuals outside of the collaborative storytelling platforms, we can begin to see a reemergence of folk stories and songs as widespread cultural practices. And as network connections become ubiquitous, and search engines and filters improve, we can begin to see this folk culture emerging to play a substantially greater role in the production of our cultural environment.

A PARTICIPATORY CULTURE: TOWARD POLICY

Culture is too broad a concept to suggest an all-encompassing theory centered around technology in general or the Internet in particular. My focus is therefore much narrower, along two dimensions. First, I am concerned with thinking about the role of culture to human interactions that can be understood in terms of basic liberal political commitments—that is to say, a concern for the degree of freedom individuals have to form and pursue a life plan, and the degree of participation they can exercise in debating and determining collective action. Second, my claim is focused on the relative attractiveness of the twentieth-century industrial model of cultural production and what appears to be emerging as the networked model in the early twenty-first century, rather than on the relationship of the latter to some theoretically defined ideal culture.

A liberal political theory cannot wish away the role of culture in structuring human events. We engage in wide ranges of social practices of making and exchanging symbols that are concerned with how our life is and how it might be, with which paths are valuable for us as individuals to pursue and which are not, and with what objectives we as collective communities—from the local to the global—ought to pursue. This unstructured, ubiquitous conversation is centrally concerned with things that a liberal political system speaks to, but it is not amenable to anything like an institutionalized process that could render its results "legitimate." Culture operates as a set of background assumptions and common knowledge that structure our understanding of the state of the world and the range of possible actions and outcomes open to us individually and collectively. It constrains the range of conver-

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sational moves open to us to consider what we are doing and how we might act differently. In these regards, it is a source of power in the critical-theory sense—a source that exerts real limits on what we can do and how we can be. As a source of power, it is not a natural force that stands apart from human endeavor and is therefore a fact that is not itself amenable to political evaluation. As we see well in the efforts of parents and teachers, advertising agencies and propaganda departments, culture is manipulable, manageable, and a direct locus of intentional action aimed precisely at harnessing its force as a way of controlling the lives of those who inhabit it. At the same time, however, culture is not the barrel of a gun or the chains of a dungeon. There are limits on the degree to which culture can actually control those who inhabit it. Those degrees depend to a great extent on the relative difficulty or ease of seeing through culture, of talking about it with others, and of seeing other alternatives or other ways of symbolizing the possible and the desirable.

Understanding that culture is a matter of political concern even within a liberal framework does not, however, translate into an agenda of intervention in the cultural sphere as an extension of legitimate political decision making. Cultural discourse is systematically not amenable to formal regulation, management, or direction from the political system. First, participation in cultural discourse is intimately tied to individual self-expression, and its regulation would therefore require levels of intrusion in individual autonomy that would render any benefits in terms of a participatory political system Pyrrhic indeed. Second, culture is much more intricately woven into the fabric of everyday life than political processes and debates. It is language—the basic framework within which we can comprehend anything, and through which we do so everywhere. To regulate culture is to regulate our very comprehension of the world we occupy. Third, therefore, culture infuses our thoughts at a wide range of levels of consciousness. Regulating culture, or intervening in its creation and direction, would entail self-conscious action to affect citizens at a subconscious or weakly conscious level. Fourth, and finally, there is no Archimedean point outside of culture on which to stand and decide—let us pour a little bit more of this kind of image or that, so that we achieve a better consciousness, one that better fits even our most just and legitimately arrived-at political determinations.

A systematic commitment to avoid direct intervention in cultural exchange does not leave us with nothing to do or say about culture, and about law or policy as it relates to it. What we have is the capacity and need

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to observe a cultural production and exchange system and to assure that it is as unconstraining and free from manipulation as possible. We must diagnose what makes a culture more or less opaque to its inhabitants; what makes it more or less liable to be strictly constraining of the conversations that rely on it; and what makes the possibility of many and diverse sources and forms of cultural intervention more or less likely. On the background of this project, I suggest that the emergence of Internet culture is an attractive development from the perspective of liberal political theory. This is so both because of the technical characteristics of digital objects and computer network communications, and because of the emerging industrial structure of the networked information economy—typified by the increased salience of nonmarket production in general and of individual production, alone or in concert with others, in particular. The openness of digital networks allows for a much wider range of perspectives on any particular symbol or range of symbols to be visible for anyone, everywhere. The cross section of views that makes it easy to see that Barbie is a contested symbol makes it possible more generally to observe very different cultural forms and perspectives for any individual. This transparency of background unstated assumptions and common knowledge is the beginning of self-reflection and the capacity to break out of given molds. Greater transparency is also a necessary element in, and a consequence of, collaborative action, as various participants either explicitly, or through negotiating the divergence of their nonexplicit different perspectives, come to a clearer statement of their assumptions, so that these move from the background to the fore, and become more amenable to examination and revision. The plasticity of digital objects, in turn, improves the degree to which individuals can begin to produce a new folk culture, one that already builds on the twentieth-century culture that was highly unavailable for folk retelling and re-creation. This plasticity, and the practices of writing your own culture, then feed back into the transparency, both because the practice of making one's own music, movie, or essay makes one a more self-conscious user of the cultural artifacts of others, and because in retelling anew known stories, we again come to see what the originals were about and how they do, or do not, fit our own sense of how things are and how they ought to be. There is emerging a broad practice of learning by doing that makes the entire society more effective readers and writers of their own culture.

By comparison to the highly choreographed cultural production system of the industrial information economy, the emergence of a new folk culture

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and of a wider practice of active personal engagement in the telling and retelling of basic cultural themes and emerging concerns and attachments offers new avenues for freedom. It makes culture more participatory, and renders it more legible to all its inhabitants. The basic structuring force of culture is not eliminated, of course. The notion of floating monads disconnected from a culture is illusory. Indeed, it is undesirable. However, the framework that culture offers us, the language that makes it possible for us to make statements and incorporate the statements of others in the daily social conversation that pervades life, is one that is more amenable to our own remaking. We become more sophisticated users of this framework, more self-conscious about it, and have a greater capacity to recognize, challenge, and change that which we find oppressive, and to articulate, exchange, and adopt that which we find enabling. As chapter 11 makes clear, however, the tension between the industrial model of cultural production and the networked information economy is nowhere more pronounced than in the question of the degree to which the new folk culture of the twenty-first century will be permitted to build upon the outputs of the twentieth-century industrial model. In this battle, the stakes are high. One cannot make new culture ex nihilo. We are as we are today, as cultural beings, occupying a set of common symbols and stories that are heavily based on the outputs of that industrial period. If we are to make this culture our own, render it legible, and make it into a new platform for our needs and conversations today, we must find a way to cut, paste, and remix present culture. And it is precisely this freedom that most directly challenges the laws written for the twentieth-century technology, economy, and cultural practice.

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