Labour of love

An archaeology of affect as power in e-commerce

Kylie Jarrett
School of Communication, Information and New Media, University of South Australia

Abstract

In the discourses of the electronic commerce (e-commerce) industry, consumers are alleged to be empowered by the affective relations they establish in online communities. This article investigates this claim using a Foucauldian archaeological framework. It seeks to identify the key social and historical conditions that have enabled this representation to appear and to become a viable characterization. The question it examines is not whether consumers are actually empowered by e-commerce, but why it is deemed important to interrogate online consumers' affective activity in terms of power.

Keywords: affective relations, consumer culture, e-commerce, Foucault, Internet, on-line community, power

Within the discursive environment of electronic commerce, particularly Web-based commerce, there are many claims of the empowered nature of the consumer. Some of this empowerment is alleged to lie in the social relations built in commercial online communities. In e-commerce literature, including industry, popular and academic sources, affectivity is adjudged a key means for consumers to assert and develop their power relative to that of producers. Questions can naturally be raised as to the validity of this claim and the nature of these communities (for instance Fernback, 1997, 1999). However, the fundamental question for this article is not whether the affective relations of e-commerce consumers are truly empowering, but the issue of why this question exists in the first place. Why has the affectivity of consumers been recognized, represented and interrogated in terms of power? What is it about contemporary socio-historical conditions that makes it a reasonable statement to assert that online consumers are empowered, and specifically that they are empowered through their affective

relations? These questions, archaeological in a Foucauldian sense (Foucault, 1969/1972), allow us to reveal not the truth or falsity of affective consumer empowerment, but the underlying environment that sustains it as a discourse.

The empowered e-commerce consumer

First, though, we must specify what the industry literature claims is empowering about e-commerce. The fundamental argument is that consumers are empowered by the interactive nature of the medium.[1] With the ability to 'talk back', to engage with the content rather than passively absorbing it, the e-commerce consumer is viewed as exploiting and exploring a new power dynamic between themselves and producers. In effect, interactivity is claimed to offer the consumer control of the consumption process. This premise is the starting point for the literature of the e-commerce industry. Murphy, for instance, begins *Web Rules* with the declaration that:

> We're witnessing the greatest transition of power in history, one that will take power away from the mightiest corporations and social institutions and give it to … consumers. That's right, the consumer: you and me; our neighbors, parents, and friends; even our enemies. In fact, we're already very powerful. Individual consumers are gaining the power to shake corporate giants, to force politicians to respond to our concerns, to demand a better bargain in the marketplace, and to shape what's in the media. (2000: 1)

Many of these claims are associated with the opposition to traditional marketing paradigms provided by the interactive medium. The unidirectional, mass marketing message of advertising is alleged to be subverted by the 'near-perfect' information and feedback functions available to online consumers (Tapscott et al., 2000). This shift to interactive consumers is described by Bell executives John MacDonald and Jim Tobin as that from a 'couch potato' model to a 'couch commando' scenario 'where the consumer takes control of the information environment' (1998: 208). The utilization of these technologies, it is argued, means the balance of marketplace power markedly shifts to the consumer.

However, the conceptualization of empowerment through interactivity in these arguments is based on a specific characterization of the consumer. It is centred around the idea of consumers, not as a mass phenomenon, but as unique individuals, with a range of specific and subjective wants and desires. Most importantly though, this framework also relies on the conceptualization of the consumer as a rational and self-interested creature who actively seeks to maximize their returns from engagement with e-commerce producers. This idea of the self-interested consumer reaches its zenith in discussions about the value of information generated and offered by cus-

tomers online. Hagel and Rayport (1997/1999), for instance, argue that consumers' concern for privacy:

> ... has less to do with the desire to keep information about themselves confidential and more to do with the pragmatic assessment that the returns for the information they divulge are, simply put, unsatisfactory. (1997/1999: 160; see also Dancer, 1999; Schwartz, 1997: 85)

In e-commerce discourses it is assumed that the individual, driven by a range of preferences, makes rational decisions when seeking to satisfy those predetermined tastes. The role of the producer is to accommodate, predict and facilitate this satisfaction. This has resulted in an industry emphasis on Customer Relationship Management (CRM) technologies which offer personalized service to accommodate the unique preferences of individual users. From this perspective, it is ultimately an individual consumer's self-interest that is assumed to dictate the processes of electronic commerce.

Community and the empowered consumer

However, there is a competing tendency within the discourses of e-commerce which is of more interest here. Rather than being conceived solely in isolation, and acting in an entirely rational, self-serving fashion, e-commerce consumers are also represented as embedded within social relations which impact upon their decision-making and consumption behaviour. These communities are also considered a site of consumer power.

It is argued by Kozinets that online communities of consumption are 'becoming important arenas for organizing consumer resistance'. These groups, he says, can engage in 'transformational interactions aimed directly at the marketer' (1999).

> Empowered by information exchange and emboldened by relational interactions, consumers will use their online activities to actively judge consumption offerings, and increasingly resist what they see as misdirected mass mailings, or their online variant, 'spam'. (1999)

A preliminary analysis of online community by Fischer et al. also revealed that Internet-based consumption communities are not empowering simply because of the 'access to information they provide but because of the sense of collective identity forged with other consumers' (1996: 181). Through recognizing a common interest, consumers can gain a greater collective voice with which to speak out, for or against a consumer good or service. As Kozinets neatly summarizes: 'Organizations of consumers can make successful demands on marketers that individuals cannot' (1999).

This politicization of consumers can take the simple form of 'word of mouth'. Online, consumers can easily inform other consumers about a

product, or their experience with a service or company. Social networks can be used to quickly disseminate negative and potentially damaging information. Thus, despite often intense loyalty to a brand, the interrelationship and camaraderie of consumption community members can lead them to be quick to organize and challenge a company's practice deemed inappropriate or counter to consumer desires (Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001). In this way, online consumption community members build up a range of tools for resistance.

What can be considered empowering about online community is, then, the opportunity it offers for collective resistance to the mass marketing model. Through online community, marketing can become more an exchange between peers than the manipulation of ignorant users by corporations. The transgressive nature of this practice reaches its peak in the peer-to-peer model associated with file exchange networks such as Napster (Rimmer, 2001).

Network economics

However, online communities do not *necessarily* offend corporate sensibilities, nor subvert the capitalist process in the manner attributed to Napster. The role of communities in the field of 'viral marketing' – a method in which advertising is spread by users not the originator (Houghton, 2000; Porter, 2000) – cannot be overlooked. Furthermore, most online communities are not oppositional to commercial imperatives but are simply forums for consumers to share information and experiences, often facilitated by the company itself. These can be directly or indirectly related to the products associated with a company. Fabric, craft and home interiors retailer Spotlight (www.spotlight.com.au), to cite one example, features a breast cancer support network among its other product-related groups and bulletin boards (Barker, 2001). Community facilitation is also a core commercial function of many (relatively) successful Internet-based businesses such as AOL (www.aol.com) and Yahoo! Geocities (geocities.yahoo.com/).

However, on sites where community is not the central concern, it is nevertheless not a mere token or marginal addendum to the main commercial transaction. Relationships between consumers are considered fundamental to the economic model of the Internet or 'network economics'. Evans and Wurster put the argument succinctly: 'In a networked market, the greater the number of people connected, the greater the value of being connected, thus creating *network economies of scale*' (1997/1999: 29, original emphasis). It is argued that because information – the resource of the World Wide Web medium – is non-depletable (Evans and Wurster, 2000: 15), it does not suffer from the problem of scarcity associated with other resources. Instead it is driven by the interlinked phenomena of increasing returns and network effects. The law of increasing returns argues that once a company has

absorbed the cost of making the first digital 'copy', the marginal reproduction cost increasingly approaches zero (Evans and Wurster, 2000: 15; Tapscott et al., 2000: 5–6). Thus significant economies emerge and returns dramatically increase when a critical mass of consumers coalesces at a website to absorb the sunk costs of production.

The importance of network effects is that the value of information, and the network within which it is transmitted, actually increases through widespread use. This is likened to the increased worth afforded a standalone telephone or fax machine by its interconnection with other instruments and users (Evans and Wurster, 1997/1999: 29). It is the positivity of the feedback loop of increasing returns and network effects which leads *Wired* editor Kevin Kelly to declare that in networks such as the Internet 'we find self-reinforcing virtuous circles. Each additional member increases the network's value, which in turn attracts more members, initiating a spiral of benefits' (1998: 25). Thus, rather than suffering depreciation from a multiplicity of users, e-commerce sites instead gain in value.

Within this economic framework, facilitation of user communities is considered a fundamental requirement. It is also deemed a means of adding value to the information commodity, devalued by its inherent reproducibility. Community adds a unique value to an online commercial enterprise which differentiates it from its competitors (Shapiro and Varian, 1999). Furthermore, cultivating loyalty and emotional investment through community provides a means of increasing site 'stickiness' – the amount of time a consumer spends engaged with a site – and also the 'switching costs' for that consumer – the costs incurred by users when required to shift technologies, or brands (Armstrong and Hagel, 1996; Tapscott, 1998). This has a cyclical nature. The greater the consumer investment in the online community, the more value they will find in the site, reinforcing that original investment. Over time, the added value of community relationships can render a website indispensable to a consumer. This logic leads Sprint executive Robba Benjamin (1998) to argue that community is the true 'killer app.' of cyberspace. It is the key element that allows a company to 'build customer loyalty to a degree that today's marketers can only dream of and, in turn, generate strong economic returns' (Armstrong and Hagel, 1996).

This approach has been utilized, if not spearheaded, by Amazon.com (www.amazon.com). The 'Amazon experience' has gone beyond allowing customers to interact with the database of books but has also deliberately advanced:

> … the idea of creating a *community* of customers. The company fostered this clubby feeling by encouraging readers to write and submit book reviews (which Amazon.com would post on the website). This 'audience participation' gave readers the feeling that they were making a contribution … (Spector, 2000: 78; own emphasis)

Online auction site eBay's (www.ebay.com) relative economic success is also argued to be partly caused by the network effects created by the social nature of the auction process (Blankenhorn, 2001; Boyd, 2002). Don Tapscott (1999) also describes how the social 'values' and norms of the eBay user community have produced the reliable sales environments that have enabled the essentially unregulated retail service to flourish.

The crucial feature of network economics, then, is that value resides in the web of relationships a company fosters rather than its internal logic or its assets (Kelly, 1998: 26). This necessarily places the consumer, and specifically the affective connections of that consumer, at the core of any commercial enterprise operating in the network economy. This framework leads Gerry McGovern, CEO of Internet knowledge management company Nua (www.nua.com), to conclude that:

> Amazon.com is not in the 'business' of selling books. Microsoft is not in the business of making software. Yahoo is not in the directory business. America Online is not an online service provider. To one degree or another, all of the above companies are in the business of creating and servicing communities. (1999: 126)

Given this emphasis on community in the discourses of the industry, what also lies at the heart of the e-commerce consumer is affect. Consumers' emotional responses to online communities help breed loyalty to a company and the value-adding for an online product is centrally concerned with this emotionality. Clearly then the e-commerce consumer is conceptualized not only as a rational, self-interested individual in the industry literature, but also and vitally, one inherently concerned with and engaged in social relationships.

Producing affect

It is this emphasis on affect that has led some theorists to argue that e-commerce can be characterized as an 'attention economy' (Goldhaber, 1997a) or a 'high-tech gift economy' (Barbrook, 1998). Despite the divergent opinions expressed during the debate on this topic in the online journal *First Monday* (see Aigrain, 1997; Barbrook, 1998; Ghosh, 1997; Goldhaber, 1997a), the basic argument was that 'something beyond economics' was the motive behind the Internet (Ghosh, 1998). Online exchange in these conceptualizations is driven, not by abstract and standardized monetary value, but by more intangible and elusive values. The often cited source for this lies in the hacker and open-source computing cultures which are not driven by monetary gain, but by social values such as status, social recognition and self-realization (see Himanen, 2001; Soderberg, 2002). This corresponds, for instance, with the practice of the more traditionally commercial eBay user community, in which status is signalled not by wealth or fame but by the feedback from other users (Lee, 2001).

Within these kinds of conceptualizations, the e-commerce consumer is 're-embedded' in the symbolic dimensions of social relations. This places the practices of that consumer in a particular role. Online consumption, conceived as a social act, becomes less about material gain but about social identity, its manifestations, expression and codification. It is, therefore, about the:

> … long-term process by which consumers appropriate goods and services in direct repudiation of the massive and unattractive institutional forces of capitalism, the state, and, increasingly, science, which had created the goods. (Miller, 1998: 193)

Socially oriented consumption, as Miller argues, 'negates' the alienation and abstraction presupposed by capitalist economics, providing the creativity and flexibility to allow 'societies, small groups and even individuals to return to that act of self-construction of the species being that is the definition of human culture within dialectical theory' (Miller, 1998: 193). The 're-embedded' e-commerce consumer is represented as playing a similar creative and constitutive role in the construction of their world. These aspects of the industry discourse thus represent the affective consumer as an active participant in the commercial process, but importantly with a power which is productive.

In e-commerce, that productive power can take on a very material form. Amazon.com for instance uses contributions by its consumers as unpaid content. As already noted, by allowing users to 'write their own review', Amazon was attempting to create a sense of community. However, as Spector also points out:

> … a more pressing reason was that the Amazon.com website had all this white-space to fill so it needed a way to generate more content. By having customers write their own reviews – positive or negative – Amazon.com was able to spark some intellectual dialogue as well as add (free to Amazon.com) content to pages that would otherwise be virtually blank. (2000: 131–2)

eBay similarly, and most successfully, utilizes the input of consumers, solely relying on users, whether functioning as sellers or buyers, to 'take on most of the work, cost, and risk' (Tapscott et al., 2000: 43).

However, it is also specifically through affect that consumers produce value. This has been a central platform of online community aggregators such as Geocities and AOL. As Postigo (2001) describes, the labour pool of these organizations that provide online services for the facilitation of community interaction includes end users, web page viewers, open source programmers and community moderators, many of whom can be considered volunteer labour. They work for the 'love of' and emotional investment in the communities they moderate. For AOL, as much as 30 percent of its US $6.9 billion revenue for the year 2000 was estimated to be sourced in the online communication component staffed by volunteers (Grove et al.,

2001). *Forbes* magazine further calculated that AOL's use of volunteer labour rather than paid workers saved the company over US $1 billion in expenses during its first nine years of operation (Raymond, 2001). For AOL, the value of the volunteer labour of group moderators and community leaders is profound. As this example so clearly reveals, the affectivity of consumers in e-commerce amounts to a form of productive labour; no longer merely an act of consumption in the sense of 'using up', but a creative act of production.

Archaeology of productive affect

Having divined the role of affect in e-commerce and its relationship to concepts of consumer productive power as proposed in the industry literature, the Foucauldian question remains: what are the social and historical conditions of possibility that make this claim a tenable proposition? On the simplest of levels we can argue that the notion of a productive consumer is a necessary framework in neoliberal economics. The re-emergence and dominance of classical liberal economic and political frameworks have been argued extensively (see Barry, 1987; Hall and Jacques, 1990; Keat and Abercrombie, 1991; Levitas, 1986), and in most Western countries, particularly Australia, the United States and Britain, it has become the dominant socioeconomic framework. In this paradigm consumers are necessarily cast in a powerful role. *Laissez-faire* markets, controlled by the 'invisible hand' of the price mechanism, place a premium on the input of consumers. Under ideal conditions the consumer in liberal economics is at liberty, empowered if you will, to produce, challenge and modify the value of goods.

However, this role has been enhanced by recent developments in the form of the capitalist political economy. The productive power of consumers is inherently linked to the symbolic nature of consumer goods (Baudrillard, 1981; Featherstone, 1991) and the rise of promotional culture (Wernick, 1991). As the Fordist paradigm has progressed and as its arguable extension post-Fordism has emerged,[2] the mass consumption model has become increasingly fragmented. The shift to flexible production systems in response to the crisis of over-accumulation identified in the 1970s (Harvey, 1990; Lash and Urry, 1987; Lee, 1993) has permitted and depended upon an acceleration in product innovation. In turn, this has increased the possibilities for consumer goods turnover and the exploration of specialized niche markets. Just as mass production had as its necessary corollary mass consumption, flexible production has flexible consumption as its companion.

In accordance, post-Fordism has been accompanied by a greater attention to changing fashions and aesthetics (Featherstone, 1991; Harvey, 1990: 156). Lee (1993) points out that one effect of this shift has been the emergence of the 'experiential good' as a key commodity form. What is often on

sale in the contemporary marketplace is not necessarily a material good, but a non-material and thus symbolic, affective experience. This, Lee argues, explains the nature of contemporary advertising and its 'concentration upon style, form and image, rather than use-value, content and substance' (1993: 154).

However, when driven by symbolic values in this way, the economy places increased demands on producers. As Abercrombie (1994) points out, if consumption is inherently about meaning, there is immanent potential for struggle.

> Producers try to commodify meaning, that is try to make images and symbols into things which can be bought and sold. Consumers, on the other hand, try to give their own, new, meanings to the commodities and services that they buy. (1994: 51)

Abercrombie argues that in consumers' play with meanings and identities through and with consumer goods, the 'authority' of the producer to fully determine value is undermined (1991, 1994). Vitally though, this authority does not disappear but slides towards the consumer. Within this cultural framework, the consumer becomes understood, at least in relation to the producer-dominated mass market paradigm, as a more powerful participant in the productive process. The absolute distinction between production (active) and consumption (passive) is untenable in this regime. Thus, the consumer in the post-Fordist, liberal economic paradigm is necessarily recognized as active and productive rather than passive and manipulated. S/he is not merely a consumer, but a 'pro-sumer'.

Immaterial labour

Yet this 'decline of the culture of production' (Abercrombie, 1991) within the post-Fordist economy doesn't simply highlight the productive power of consumers. More specifically it highlights the productive power of the *affect* of consumers. As the producer culture has been undermined, the emphasis has shifted from product and manufacturing best practice toward selling. In his analysis of book publishing cultures, Abercrombie (1991) contends that much of this is due to the growing importance of commercial considerations over and above those of wider cultural involvement such as artistic or educational imperatives. However, a secondary index of the decline of producer culture has been the 'shift in authority and power in companies from those directly concerned with production to those who are essentially concerned with other aspects of the company' (1991: 177). Key here is the promotional machinery, typified by the marketing department, directly tying companies and their goods to consumer preferences (see also Wernick, 1991).

As encapsulated in the notion of branding, the rise of these industries has been associated with a rise in the 'immaterial labour' of consumers which

produces the 'cultural content' of the commodity (Lazzarato, n.d.). Successful brand advertising is about focusing on the advantage gained when tangible product characteristics are integrated with symbols, meanings, images and feelings from a culture, to create a brand that is loved (Davidson, 1992: 26–7; see also Hakim, 2002; McAllister, 1996). What is central to brands then is the emotional relationship between consumers and products or companies – the immaterial labour of the consumer. Goodwill towards brands, which developed along with industrialized manufacturing and was reinvigorated by Fordist economics (Klein, 2001: 7), has arguably become even more important in contemporary times. As products have become increasingly technically interchangeable, markets have become 'battlegrounds' of added value rather than functionality (Davidson, 1992: 24). The loyalty and affect of consumers consequently have significant salience. This valorization of brands can be evidenced in the 1988 purchase of Kraft by Philip Morris for US $12.6 billion, six times what the company was worth on paper. The inflated price, however, was due solely to the value of the name 'Kraft' and its cultural and social associations (Klein, 2001: 7–8). This is the economic value of the labour of the consumer.

As Negri argues, in a post-Fordist economy marked by immaterial labour and branded promotional culture, the distinction between 'productive labour' and 'unproductive labour' is blurred (1996, 1999). This, coupled with the relative decline of extractive/manufacturing industries and its material labour power (at least as physically located in Western economies), has rendered traditional means of understanding the value of labour untenable.[3] Instead:

> … productive labour is no longer considered 'that which directly produces capital', but that which reproduces society – from this point of view, its separation from unproductive labour is completely dislocated. (Negri, 1996: 157)

The contemporary political economy has thus been brought to 'recognize that value is formed in the relation of affect, that affect has fundamental productive qualifications' (Negri, 1999: 86; see also Hardt, 1999).

We can contend that the affective, and *consequently* productive, consumer is the necessary corollary of these shifts within the practices and conceptual frameworks of capitalism. Thus, consumers empowered by their social networking such as those in e-commerce, are not in opposition to the capitalist process, but rather are a contingent property of it. This is not to argue that the affective relations of online consumers are in any way 'false', or solely the product of manipulation by producers (Boorsook, 2000; Fernback, 1997, 1999). Negri himself argues that despite, or perhaps because of, its relationship to capital, great radical potential lies in the creativity of the living labour of the social worker (1996). In the model utilized here, it is not impossible for the emotional and social satisfactions of com-

mercial online communities to be 'real' but nevertheless be implicated in the regime of accumulation.

Social power

However, what is yet to be explained is how it is possible for the productive power of affective consumers to be cast as a socially, rather than merely economically significant power. To understand this, it is important to recognize the concomitant shifts in the loci of social power that have accompanied the move into a post-Fordist paradigm. The shifting mode of regulation associated with these changes has also given rise to practices which challenge established cultural hegemonies. This has been particularly significant for the idea of class struggle as a centre for social power. To summarize a vast array of arguments (see Ewen, 1976; Featherstone, 1991; Harvey, 1990; Lash and Urry, 1987; Lee, 1993; Negri, 1996; Offe, 1985; Sassen, 1998), the process of developing a class-bound identity has been increasingly problematized throughout the Fordist/post-Fordist era. Traditional identities centred on intergenerational lineage, localized and place-bound community have been decentred by the industrialization process. The fragmentation and 'loss' of artisanal skills produced by the Fordist workplace, particularly in its Taylorist model, as well as the shift from land to cities and then suburbs, have also changed the parameters through which identity can be constructed. We can also point to the breakdown of meta-narratives initiated by modernism which have, if not invalidated, certainly delimited the authority and legitimacy of traditional cultural institutions such as the state and the Church. The fixity of identity offered by all of these institutions is no longer a given and, subsequently, the acceptance of class as a rigid and unopposed source of social identity is less tenable. Also, increased relative wages and the correspondent possibilities for consumption, along with rising educational levels, have further destabilized occupational class as a key identifier and source of political power.

Community vs society

Instead, different avenues for the expression and exertion of social identity have been opened. New cultural and political identities have emerged along with communities of interest attached to them. For instance, the student uprisings of 1968 can be understood as the culmination of movements away from a cultural consensus based on traditional, hierarchical values. This moment is also used as shorthand to mark a more general movement towards a multiplication of valid ideological and political viewpoints. On the back of rising educational levels and dissatisfaction with the welfare system, those excluded from the model utilized in the administration of Fordism – those outside the white nuclear patriarchal family model – began

to protest their exclusion. As Harvey notes:

> The counter-cultural critiques and practices of the 1960s therefore paralleled movements of the excluded minorities and the critique of depersonalized bureaucratic rationality. All these threads of opposition began to fuse into a strong cultural-political movement at the very moment when Fordism as an economic system appeared to be at its apogee. (1990: 139)

The emergence of multiple critical viewpoints has had significant consequences for expressions of solidarity in society. Hebdige argues that

> … the legacy of 1968 is of course, itself, contradictory. The student uprisings highlighted the decline of workerism, productivism and hierarchical, centralised party politics. But they also heralded the growing importance of cultural and identity politics, the politics of gender, race and sexuality, the ecology and autonomy movements. (1990: 87–8)

The new hubs for social movements which have emerged from these changes are notably not the broad, mass-based political communities, but smaller, fluid and often issue-specific groups. In this way, as Rose argues (1996, 1999, 2000), the emphasis has shifted from political power as a feature of society and moved towards the idea of community. He argues that:

> Affiliation to communities of lifestyle through the practices of consumption displaces older devices of habit formation that enjoined obligations upon citizens as part of their social responsibilities. (1996: 343)

As a consequence, the locus for social responsibility and obligation is now increasingly centred upon smaller, localized communities of interest. Contemporary social power is more likely to be conceived as resident within the politics of personal community associations than the impersonal politics of the state or nation (see also Castells, 1997).

Hebdige continues to argue that this breakdown of the mass cultural consensus facilitates the move from a mass consumption society to one predicated on smaller, differentiated niche markets. In the ensuing absence of 'the mass', the language of marketing and its ability to classify social types become increasingly important. 'We may', as Hebdige says, 'find such forms of knowledge immoral, objectionable or sinister', however they do 'actively create and sustain one *version* of the social' (1990: 89, original emphasis) from which to practise resistance. The significance of Hebdige's claim lies in its revelation of the possibility of new sources of social power based not on fixed, mass identity but on market-based identities (see also Mort, 1990). In this way, it becomes possible to see how consumer practice can be understood as a socially powerful force. But the argument can be extended. With the rhetoric and practices of a minimized neoliberal state, whose regulatory interventions into the market are deemed illegitimate, consumer power becomes a real proposition.[4] Couple this with the devalorization of production and the correlative emphasis on consumption in

contemporary society, and exercising power can be more readily understood as invoking the 'exit' strategy of the consumer, rather than as a traditional mass-organized political power.

Thus, the 'communities of affect' which populate the e-commerce environment are not only *produced by* the Fordist regime of accumulation, reaching greater and more significant expression in its post-Fordist form. They are also capable of being conceptualized as exerting social power *because of* this historical background. The affective, empowered consumer is embedded in the recognition of consumer productive power inherent in demand-side economic frameworks, heightened by the increasing significance of affectivity in a symbolic economy. But it is also more than this. The fragmentation of social life, labour and meta-narratives throughout the modernist, Fordist and Keynesian regime, have resulted in an environment in which the possibility for social change *can be* directly related to consumption. Through the socio-cultural movements brought about by these shifts within and from a Fordist regime of accumulation, it has become possible to 'know' consumption not only as a socially bound act, but also, and consequently, as a socially powerful one.

It is this set of conditions that has allowed the empowered e-commerce consumer, specifically as a creature of affect, to emerge and register as a tenable proposition. This is of course not to argue that this character has an actual or effectual existence, but to work towards an understanding of how and why the e-commerce industry has fostered this figure at this moment in history. This framework allows, then, a different set of interventions from those offered in the debate about the validity of the industry's claims. We no longer need to view it as an attempt to instil a 'false consciousness' by producers. Instead, the empowered and affective e-commerce consumer becomes a contingent, and therefore contestable, feature of contemporary cultural life.

Notes

1 The specifics, evidence and archaeology of this aspect of consumer empowerment are outside the scope of this article. The following is a very brief summary of arguments within my forthcoming PhD thesis.

2 In this article I do not intend to engage with the debate on the validity of the distinction between Fordism and post-Fordism, but instead use the latter term to refer to the typical contemporary form of capitalist production as described in Kumar (1995).

3 This is not to posit that the political economy does not attempt to measure. Market research and television ratings are two key examples of the political economy measuring audience affect. However, as Negri points out, this process is essentially self-defeating. It 'flattens, controls, and commands the production of subjectivity on a disembodied horizon. Labor (attention) is here subsumed, stripping it from value (of the subject), that is, from affect' (1999: 79).

4 Whether or not it is an effective power is not under consideration, but only whether it becomes possible to think of consumption as an act with determining power.

References

Abercrombie, N. (1991) 'The Privilege of the Producer', pp. 171–85 in R. Keat and N. Abercrombie (eds) *Enterprise Culture*. London: Routledge.

Abercrombie, N. (1994) 'Authority and Consumer Society', pp. 43–57 in R. Keat, N. Whiteley and N. Abercrombie (eds) *The Authority of the Consumer*. London: Routledge.

Aigrain, P. (1997) 'Attention, Media, Value and Economics', *First Monday* 2(9) [online, accessed 3 April 2001; URL: http://firstmonday.org]

Armstrong, A. and J. Hagel III (1996) 'The Real Value of On-line Communities', *Harvard Business Review* May/June [online, accessed 25 May 2000; Factiva database URL: http://www.factiva.com/]

Barbrook, R. (1998) 'The Hi-tech Gift Economy', *First Monday* 3(12) [online, accessed 3 April 2001; URL: http://firstmonday.org]

Barker, G. (2001) 'Spotlight Stitches Up E-tailing', *The Age* 28 May [online, accessed 29 May 2001; URL: http://www.it.mycareer.com.au]

Barry, N.P. (1987) *The New Right*. Beckenham, Kent: Croom Helm.

Baudrillard, J. (1981) *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign*, trans. C. Levin. St Louis, MO: Telos Press.

Benjamin, R. (1998) 'Cybercommunities: Better than Being There?', pp. 298–316 in D. Tapscott, A. Lowy and D. Ticoll (eds) *Blueprint to the Digital Economy: Creating Wealth in the Era of E-business*. New York: McGraw-Hill.

Blankenhorn, D. (2001) 'New Pricing for a New Century', *Media Beagle* Australia.internet.com, 13 Nov. [online, accessed 14 Nov. 2001; URL: http://australia.internet.com]

Boorsook, P. (2000) 'Focus on Community', *Beyond Computers* 19 April [online, accessed 10 April 2001; URL: http://www.transaction.net/people/paulina/focus_on_community.html]

Boyd, J. (2002) 'In Community We Trust: Online Security Communication at eBay', *Journal of Computer Mediated Communication* 7(3) [online, accessed 17 Oct. 2002; URL: http://www.ascusc.org/jcmc]

Castells, M. (1997) *The Power of Identity, Vol. 2 of The Information Age: Economy, Society and Culture*. Oxford: Blackwell.

Dancer, H. (1999) 'No Such Thing as Free Information', *The Bulletin* 11 May: 88.

Davidson, M. (1992) *The Consumerist Manifesto: Advertising in Postmodern Times*. London: Routledge.

Evans, P.B. and T.S. Wurster (1997/1999) 'Strategy and the New Economics of Information', pp. 13–34 in D. Tapscott (ed.) *Creating Value in the Network Economy*. Boston, MA: Harvard Business School Press.

Evans, P.B. and T.S. Wurster (2000) *Blown to Bits: How the New Economics of Information Transforms Strategy*. Boston, MA: Harvard Business School Press.

Ewen, S. (1976) *Captains of Consciousness: Advertising and the Social Roots of the Consumer Culture*. New York: McGraw-Hill.

Featherstone, M. (1991) *Consumer Culture and Postmodernism*. London: Sage.

Fernback, J. (1997) 'The Individual within the Collective: Virtual Ideology and the Realization of Collective Principles', pp. 36–54 in S.G. Jones (ed.) *Virtual Culture: Identity and Communication in Cybersociety*. London: Sage.

Fernback, J. (1999) 'There is a There There: Notes Toward a Definition of Cybercommunity', pp. 203–20 in S.G. Jones (ed.) *Doing Internet Research: Critical Issues and Methods for Examining the Net*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Fischer, E., J. Bristor and B. Gainer (1996) 'Creating or Escaping Community: An Exploratory Study of Internet Consumers' Behavior', *Advances in Consumer Research* 23(3.6): 178–82.

Foucault, M. (1969/1972) *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, trans. A.M. Sheridan Smith. London: Routledge.

Ghosh, R.A. (1997) 'Economics is Dead. Long Live Economics! A Commentary on Michael Goldhaber's "The Attention Economy" ', *First Monday* 2(5) [online, accessed 3 April 2001; URL: http://firstmonday.org]

Ghosh, R.A. (1998) 'Cooking Pot Markets: An Economic Model for the Trade in Free Goods and Services on the Internet', *First Monday* 3(3) [online, accessed 3 April 2001; URL: http://firstmonday.org]

Goldhaber, M.H. (1997a) 'The Attention Economy and the Internet', *First Monday* 2(4) [online, accessed 3 April 2001; URL: http://firstmonday.org]

Goldhaber, M.H. (1997b) 'What's the Right Economics for Cyberspace?', *First Monday* 2(7) [online, accessed 3 April 2001; URL: http://firstmonday.org]

Grove, R., M.S. Malone and P. Dillon (2001) 'The Little People vs America Online', *Forbes.com* 19 Feb. [online, accessed 18 Feb. 2002; URL: http://www.forbes.com]

Hagel, J., III and J.F. Rayport (1997/1999) 'The Coming Battle for Customer Information', pp. 159–72 in D. Tapscott (ed.) *Creating Value in the Network Economy*. Boston, MA: Harvard Business School Publishing.

Hakim, S. (2002) 'Making the Emotional Connection', *Professional Marketing* Feb.: 11.

Hall, S. and M. Jacques (eds) (1990) *New Times: The Changing Face of Politics in the 1990s*. New York: Verso.

Hardt, M. (1999) 'Affective Labor', *Boundary 2* 26(2): 89–100.

Harvey, D. (1990) *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change*. Cambridge, MA: Blackwell.

Hebdige, D. (1990) 'After the Masses', pp. 76–93 in S. Hall and M. Jacques (eds) *New Times: The Changing Face of Politics in the 1990s*. New York: Verso.

Himanen, P. (2001) *The Hacker Ethic and the Spirit of the Information Age*. London: Secker and Warburg.

Houghton, M. (2000) 'The Best Advertising Money Can't Buy', *Marketing and eBusiness* Aug.: 20–5.

Keat, R. and N. Abercrombie (eds) (1991) *Enterprise Culture*. London: Routledge.

Kelly, K. (1998) *New Rules for the New Economy: Ten Radical Strategies for a Connected World*. New York: Penguin.

Klein, N. (2001) *No Logo*. London: Flamingo.

Kozinets, R.V. (1999) 'E-tribalized Marketing? The Strategic Implications of Virtual Communities of Consumption', *European Management Journal* 17(3): 252–64.

Kumar, K. (1995) *From Post-industrial to Post-modern Society: New Theories of the Contemporary World*. Oxford: Blackwell.

Lash, S. and J. Urry (1987) *The End of Organized Capitalism*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.

Lazzarato, M. (n.d.) 'General Intellect: Towards an Inquiry into Immaterial Labour', trans. E. Emery. Originally published *Common Sense* [online, accessed 21 Feb. 2002; URL: http://www.emery.archive.mcmail.com]

Lee, J. (2001) 'Ebay University: Part School and Part Tent Meeting', *New York Times on the Web*, 14 June [online, accessed 18 June 2001; URL: http://www.nytimes.com]

Lee, M.J. (1993) *Consumer Culture Reborn: The Cultural Politics of Consumption*. London: Routledge.

Levitas, R. (ed.) (1986) *The Ideology of the New Right*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

MacDonald, J. and J. Tobin (1998) 'Customer Empowerment in the Digital Economy', pp. 202–20 in D. Tapscott, A. Lowy and D. Ticoll (eds) *Blueprint to the Digital Economy: Creating Wealth in the Era of E-business*. New York: McGraw-Hill.

McAllister, M.P. (1996) *The Commercialization of American Culture: New Advertising, Control and Democracy*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

McGovern, G. (1999) *The Caring Economy: Business Principles for the New Digital Age*. Dublin: Blackhall Publishing.

Miller, D. (1998) 'Conclusion: A Theory of Virtualism', pp. 187–215 in J.G. Carrier and D. Miller (eds) *Virtualism: A New Political Economy*. Oxford: Berg.

Mort, F. (1990) 'The Politics of Consumption', pp. 160–72 in S. Hall and M. Jacques (eds) *New Times: The Changing Face of Politics in the 1990s*. New York: Verso.

Muniz, A.M., Jr and T.C. O'Guinn (2001) 'Brand Community', *Journal of Consumer Research* 27: 412–32.

Murphy, T. (2000) *Web Rules: How the Internet is Changing the Way Consumers Make Choices*. USA: Dearborn Financial Publishing.

Negri, A. (1996) 'Twenty Theses on Marx: Interpretation of the Class Situation Today', pp. 149–80 in S. Makdisi, C. Casarino and R.E. Karl (eds) *Marxism Beyond Marxism*. New York: Routledge.

Negri, A. (1999) 'Value and Affect', trans. Michael Hardt, *Boundary 2* 26(2): 77–88.

Offe, C. (1985) *Disorganized Capitalism*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Porter, R. (2000) 'Viral Marketing – Still Catching On?', *E-media Marketer*, australia.internet.com, 28 Sept. [online, accessed 30 Sept. 2000; URL: http://www.australia.internet.com]

Postigo, H. (2001) 'Unwaged Labor: A Case Study of America Online Community', unpublished conference paper, AoIR 2.O Interconnections conference, Minneapolis, 10–14 Oct.

Raymond, D. (2001) 'True Value', *Forbes.com* 19 Feb. [online, accessed 18 Feb. 2002; URL: http://www.forbes.com]

Rimmer, M. (2001) 'Napster: Infinite Digital Jukebox or Pirate Bazaar?', *Media International Australia* 98: 27–38.

Rose, N. (1996) 'The Death of the Social? Re-figuring the Territory of Government', *Economy and Society* 25(3): 327–56.

Rose, N. (1999) *Powers of Freedom: Reframing Political Thought*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Rose, N. (2000) 'Community, Citizenship, and the Third Way', *American Behavioral Scientist* 43(9): 1395–412.

Sassen, S. (1998) *Globalization and its Discontents: Essays on the Mobility of People and Money*. New York: New Press.

Schwartz, E.I. (1997) *Webonomics: Nine Essential Principles for Growing Your Business on the World Wide Web*. New York: Broadway Books.

Shapiro, C. and H.R. Varian (1999) *Information Rules: A Strategic Guide to the Network Economy*. Boston, MA: Harvard Business School Press.

Soderberg, J. (2002) 'Copyleft vs. Copyright: A Marxist Critique', *First Monday* 7(3) [online, accessed 14 March 2002; URL: http://firstmonday.org]

Spector, R. (2000) *Amazon.com Get Big Fast: Inside the Revolutionary Business Model that Changed the World*. Sydney: HarperBusiness.

Tapscott, D. (1998) 'Introduction', pp. 1–16 in D. Tapscott, A. Lowy and D. Ticoll (eds) *Blueprint to the Digital Economy: Creating Wealth in the Era of E-business*. New York: McGraw-Hill.

Tapscott, D. (1999) 'Introduction', pp. vii–xxvi in D. Tapscott (ed.) *Creating Value in the Network Economy*. Boston, MA: Harvard Business School Publishing.

Tapscott, D., D. Ticoll and A. Lowy (2000) *Digital Capital: Harnessing the Power of Business Webs*. London: Nicholas Brealey Publishing.

Wernick, A. (1991) *Promotional Culture: Advertising, Ideology and Symbolic Expression*. London: Sage.

Biographical note

Kylie Jarrett is currently completing her PhD at the University of South Australia. Entitled 'Windows™ Shopping: Deconstructing the Empowered E-commerce Consumer', it explores the discursive environment of the commercial Internet. *Address*: School of Communication, Information and New Media, University of South Australia, St Bernards Road, Magill, SA 5072. [email:kylie.Jarrett@unisa.adu.au]