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## The Technological Embodiment of Colonialism in Puerto Rico

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Although the literature on colonial countries has long emphasized underdevelopment as an effect of the ways in which the colonizing powers assert their monopolistic access to cutting-edge technology at the expense of the colonized (delayed technology transfer, for instance, or unilateral decision making on the part of the colonial government concerning implementation), this literature has not examined the connection between technology and colonialism in Puerto Rico. Puerto Rico provides a unique example of a colony under a supposedly pre-modern regime (Spain), as well as a hyper-modern and post-industrial one (the United States). Not that the technological space has been totally neglected in literature. There are, for instance, a few studies concerning particular technologies, including that of birth control, with a particular emphasis on sterilization, used during the 1920s-30s and that of media, in particular the advent of radio, film, and print media in the late 1940s.<sup>1</sup> There is, however, no general historical account of the introduction, presence, and development of technology on the island. Against this background, I present preliminary research that aims to explore the ways in which new technologies (at the time they were introduced) embodied political and economical disruptions in Puerto Rico by looking at three specific events. One occurred under the Spanish in the nineteenth century, while the other two (in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries) occurred under the United States. Accordingly, this article will identify the way in which Puerto Ricans reacted to what I refer to as the technological embodiment of colonialism.

Mackay and Gillespie argue, “technologies reflect and embody prevailing social relations that demonstrate their political nature; but technologies are not simply direct translations of economic imperatives into tangible machines and operations” (7). Winner more cautiously argues, “the physical arrangements of industrial production, warfare, communications, and the like have fundamentally changed the experience of citizenship. But to go beyond this obvious fact and argue that certain technologies *in themselves* have political properties seems, at first glance, completely mistaken” (34). Yet, Winner argues, technology is not *per se* neutral, but gains its political coloration from the cultural values and power relations in which it is embedded. Against the argument that technological advancement is a pure product of economic rationality, Winner offers two different counter-proposals. Firstly, there are technologies in which the design and/or arrangement of the device or system could provide a convenient means of establishing patterns of power and/or authority in a given setting and that these

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<sup>1</sup> See Mass and Briggs on birth control; Thompson on media. The Division of Community Education (DIVEDCO) was one of the initiatives of the Popular Democratic Party of Puerto Rico as it came into absolute legislative and executive power following the 1948 general elections. The program consisted of producing films, posters, and books to educate the community in issues like health, community involvement, cooperativism, rights and education and, consequently, motivated the development of a relatively primitive media infrastructure

affordances provide powerful inducements to the adaptation of these technologies. Secondly, there are technologies possessing intractable properties that are unavoidably linked to the institutionalized patterns of power and authority in which they were originally embedded. While these two interpretations can overlap and intersect at many points, the main point, for Winner, lies in the fact that technological design does not have to be traced to some conscious intent on the part of the designer. Instead, the design operates with assumptions and contexts in which certain political qualities are given as norms, with the result that the design embodies power relations inherent to a social formation – even if the result of implementing the technology can give rise to accidental and unexpected social changes.

Using these points as my guide, I will examine the colonial tensions embodied in three different technological effects as they surface in three moments in the history of Puerto Rico. The first event occurred during the last years of Spanish rule on the island. The island's governing establishment sought to electrify Old San Juan and change from kerosene gas in time to be one of the centerpieces of the quadricentennial celebrations in 1894, which marked Puerto Rico's discovery and colonization by the Spaniards. In the tumult of the process, the streetlamps in the quarter were torn down by protesters. The archives of Puerto Rican periodicals of the time, *El Buscapié*<sup>2</sup> and *La Democracia*<sup>3</sup>, record the symbolic interactions between the common citizen of the nineteenth century and technological change.<sup>4</sup>

The second event took place in a decade of tension between the American-leaning Puerto Rican establishment and independence advocates. On July 25, 1978, near the WRIK Communication Tower at Cerro Maravilla (which means “Marvelous Hill”), two young men, Arnaldo Dario Rosado, 24, and Carlos Enrique Soto Arriví, 18, activists of the Puerto Rico independence movement, *Movimiento Revolucionado Armado*, were killed by intelligence agents of the Puerto Rico police. The young men had been planning to sabotage the communications tower of WRIK as part of an anti-colonialist, pro-independence protest by the *Movimiento Revolucionado Armado*. Here I will look at the mythic place<sup>5</sup> of Cerro Maravilla's Communications Tower and will consider the confrontation between the state, the guerrillas, and the technostructure in which both sides were enveloped through analysis of news stories and images of the

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<sup>2</sup> *El Buscapié*. (October 29, 30, 31, 1894). San Juan, Puerto Rico.

<sup>3</sup> *La Democracia*. (October 30, 1894). San Juan, Puerto Rico.

<sup>4</sup> This first analysis was the most challenging of the three, given that the historical time period in which the events took place—the late 19<sup>th</sup> century—has not received a great deal of historiographical attention. Silvia Álvarez-Curbelo (1996) also mentioned the riots and referenced the newspaper reports and editorials of the time.

<sup>5</sup> The concept of “mythic place” is introduced by Vincent Mosco (2004).

coverage in the periodical *El Mundo* during the two weeks that followed the murders.<sup>6</sup>

Bringing us into our own era, I take my final case from the Puerto Rican Fiscal Crisis of 2006, which forced a shutdown of the Puerto Rican government after it ran out of funds during the closing months of the 2005-2006 fiscal year. The shutdown left about 100,000 public employees without pay and shut down more than 1,500 public schools. During this crisis, the Internet became the crucial medium through which information was conveyed and the massive public demonstration against the shutdown, called “*Puerto Rico Grita*” (Puerto Rico Shouts), was organized. In the end, the demonstration brought together about 50,000 protesters on April 28, 2006. A sample of emails sent by the local government and the citizens during the crisis reflect Yochai Benkler’s notion of the Network Public Sphere.

Throughout these three disparate but related events, I contend that political tensions were embodied in technology and point to how both the Spanish and U.S. empires conceive of Puerto Rico as a technology itself.

#### THE MISE- EN-SCÈNE OF PROGRESS IN SAN JUAN

As Benedict Anderson famously observed, nationalism, as the way certain geographically dispersed communities come to imagine themselves as a unit, depends on the development of press media to give this community a common, synchronous vernacular and symbology. Mechanical reproduction and the subsequent commodification of print language, which allowed disparate groups of people to imagine themselves as part of a community, was the first stage of the national imaginary of the modern era. At the end of the nineteenth century, Puerto Rico experienced an exponential rise in the number of publications and periodicals, which in turn codified the social, political, and economic crisis through which the island was passing in public discourse. Puerto Rican historian Silvia Álvarez Curbelo identified twenty-four new periodicals and magazines that appeared in 1894. Some of them, like *El Buscapie*, *La Democracia*, and *La Gaceta de Puerto Rico*, offered reports on the ongoing urbanization of the island caused by the flight from rural areas as sectors of the island’s economy were realigned to make agriculture secondary to an urban-based industrial system.

Daniel Bell described the cultural coordinates of this transition to industrialism in his work, *The Coming of Post-industrial Society*:

The world has become technical and rationalized. The machine predominates, and the rhythms of life are mechanically paced: time

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<sup>6</sup> *El Mundo*. (July 26, 27, 28, 29, 30 and August 1<sup>st</sup>, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 1978). San Juan, Puerto Rico.

is chronological, methodical, evenly spaced. Energy has replaced raw muscle; and provides the power that is the basis of productivity...Energy and machines transform the nature of work. Skills are broken down into simpler components, and the artisan of the past is replaced by two new figures—the engineer, who is responsible for the layout and flow of work, and the semiskilled worker, the human cog between the machines. (87)

On the island, this transformation began just after the abolition of slavery in 1873, due to a twofold process. On the one hand, agricultural land was concentrated in the hands of few landholders who squeezed more profit out of their holdings by cutting labor costs. While on the other hand, Puerto Rico's great export, sugar, became the victim of the collapse of international sugar prices, which made savings of labor cost even more important. As a result, unemployed and landless workers, formerly employed in the sugar cane fields, migrated either into the interior to work on coffee plantations, which were experiencing a growth spurt, or to the coastal cities. Álvarez-Curbelo recognized that this produced a significant effect on the “make-up of jobs and occupations; on the emergence of urban unemployed and underemployed; and, consequently, on the ways for social organization and protest” (123).

Popular protest against these realignments and inequalities, embodied in the disorder of the reaction to electric street lighting, released its fury against that technology by throwing stones and tearing down the lights, which were government property. The sound of broken glass was enough to generate interesting newspaper narratives. Journalist Manuel Fernández Juncos told the story:

During yesterday's disturbances, a spirit of hostility was directed toward the public lighting system, which is an element of culture, commodity, and even social security, favoring both the powerful and the needy, and this initial defect lessened its significance. (*El Buscapie*, October 29, 1894)

However, an unidentified protester stated:

We are fighting against the individual greed of some who have declared war on the less fortunate. Down with high prices! Down with the streetlamps! (*El Buscapie*, October 30, 1894)

As this vignette demonstrates, the electric streetlamp became the preferred target of those who raised their voices in protest.

Nevertheless, the attack on streetlamps gains further significance when we consider the context of 1894. At the same time the residents of Old San Juan were breaking electric street lamps, the colonial establishment was celebrating the 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the “discovery” of Puerto Rico. State-directed preparations for celebrating the event with much pomp and circumstance took up the year before. The celebrations were meant to symbolize the success of the civilizing project that had led to an enlightened Hispanic-Criollo culture that facilitated Puerto Rico’s entrance into modernity. The inauguration of the new electric lighting system, which would replace the old gas-based one, was to be one of the main attractions of the festivities. The system was lit up for the first time during the visit of Infanta Eulalia, the youngest child of Queen Isabella II of Spain, who had come to inspect the Caribbean colonies.

Celebrities, politicians, and royalty were often called upon to inaugurate industrial “events” in this kind of *mis-en-scène*, or staging of progress. Carolyn Marvin discusses this at length in her book *When Old Technologies Were New*. She believes:

in the perceived novelty of its high drama public role, the electric light also expressed the sense of unlimited potential that was a staple of 19<sup>th</sup>-century show; the most publicly visibly and exciting agent was certainly the electric light. [...] It was physically and symbolically associated with whatever was already monumental and spectacular. [...] It borrowed from every established mode of dramatic cultural self-promotion. (158)

But beyond the spectacle, Marvin believes that the purpose of these types of displays is to “remind attentive audiences of the existence and justification of vested power, and to impress on them its size and majesty. This was communicated in the quality of wonder excited by displays of electric light, in their lavish scale, and their clear and direct association with municipal and even national authority” (160). On the other hand, she points out that “the electric light spectacle, emerging from inherited modalities –candle, bonfires, and oil lamps– was thought to point triumphantly in a future direction that, in the end, it did not” (Marvin 153). In the case of Puerto Rico, the public lighting system not only illuminated the streets of some Puerto Rican cities, but also figuratively lit up the minds of working class Puerto Ricans, who, in the turbulent 1890s, were organizing to resist the forces let loose by the serious social, economic, and political crises through which the colony was passing.

According to Mackay and Gillespie, it is a mistake to suppose that technologies can be simply “imposed” upon populations of malleable subjects who passively submit to the changes dictated by technology. Rather, in their

political and consumer choices, these end-users are active, creative, and expressive. People may try to reject changes in system-wide technologies that are embodied in infrastructure, such as electricity, or they may reject technologies oriented towards individual consumption, such as a new kind of food, a fabric, or a toy. But outright rejection is just one in the menu of end-user options. They may collectively redefine their functional purpose, customize, or even invest them with idiosyncratic, symbolic meanings. Indeed, they may redefine a technology in a way that defies the intentions of its contrivers and their policymaking allies. Thus, variations in the appropriation of technology are an integral part of its social shaping. In this case, the breaking of the streetlamps was not so much a rejection of a certain kind of luminosity, but rather a direct protest against the decisions of the colonial elite that had collectively worsened the precarious economic situation of late nineteenth-century Puerto Rico while masking it with these modernizing gestures.

One is reminded of the classical instance of a popular movement that rejected a technology: the Luddites, an informal English group who, in the early nineteenth century, destroyed various machines designed to automate work processes in weaving.<sup>7</sup> E.P. Thompson's study proposed that the Luddites were protesting against the changed social relations, the abolition of set prices, and the introduction of a free market in labor, all of which were entrenched by the technology. In the Puerto Rican case, the San Juan Luddites were not targeting the technological change per se, but they were being buffeted by negative social forces that were destroying their economic security. According to Nye, the introduction of electricity in the U.S. produced a competition in the energy marketplace with other sources of light and power, such as coal, gas, oil and, in the case of Puerto Rico, kerosene. Transposing his arguments from the U.S., we could argue that the Puerto Rican workers understood the introduction of electric lighting within a *dystopian* narrative framework structured according to three topoi: that of *hegemony*, in which a minority group uses technology to gain/maintain control over others; that of the *apocalypse*, in which new technologies become agents of doom; and finally of *satire*, in which the promise of better living is ironically reversed when the new machines unexpectedly make life worse or lead to unexpectedly bad outcomes.

If this was the narrative in which the rioters were operating, the sabotage of this new technology would then be a way to respond to the hegemonic political and economic powers that had produced shortfalls in the daily material lives of Puerto Ricans. It would make them conscious of mass discontent. Whatever the pattern of these protests at the moment when Spanish colonial power was visibly

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<sup>7</sup> The movement, which began in 1811, was named after a mythical leader, Ned Ludd. Since then, the term Luddite has been used to describe anyone opposed to technological progress and technological change.

in eclipse on the island, the protesters were on the losing side of this specific technological change. In less than a year, the more than one hundred broken streetlamps were replaced and illuminated the dark streets of Old San Juan from a different source, and with a different quality of light, than the old gas lamps. Yet the governing colonial elite was also on the losing side. The electric lamps were replaced just in time to welcome a new invader: the American troops who landed in 1898.

#### MURDER UNDER TWO TOWERS; TENSIONS UNDER TWO FLAGS

After 1898, colonial structures and practices changed with the coming of U.S. hegemony and colonial and neo-colonial expansion in Puerto Rico. As Eduardo Galleano noted, Spanish colonialism was “basic” and primarily “extractive,” meaning that the colonies would provide raw materials, cheap energy, food, and other resources to the colonizers, which enabled the latter to accumulate capital and continue their expansion. In contrast, U.S. colonialism of the mid-twentieth century, while it involved dynamics of extraction of resources, primarily took the form of a self-appointed role as the “steward” of regional capitalism. As David Harvey argues in his book *The New Imperialism*, U.S. hegemony of this period was based on the development and maintenance of a nascent world capitalist system. The advancement in communication technologies and infrastructure, in part, made this possible.

By the 1880s, the U.S. began the construction of hardware for international communication in the Pacific and the Caribbean (Schiller). The island of Puerto Rico thus became a geopolitical target for building systems for command, control, communication, and intelligence. On July 25, 1898, at the outbreak of the Spanish-American War, Puerto Rico was invaded by United States military troops landing at the south municipality of Guánica. From that moment forward, Puerto Rico was under the military rule of the United States with officials, including the governor, appointed by the American president. On July 25, 1952, fifty-four years later, the first elected governor, Luis Muñoz Marín, proclaimed the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico. Under the new political status, Puerto Ricans maintained the U.S. citizenship granted in 1917. However, since the Commonwealth preserved many of the ancient features of the colonial regime, political tension continued between the groups who desired complete independence and the groups who desired a place in the American empire.

These tensions produced decades of guerilla assaults against American investments and technological infrastructures on the island. In the early 1950s, angered by Puerto Rico's colonial status with the United States, the Nationalist Party developed a plan that would involve an attack on the Blair House with the intention of assassinating Harry S. Truman, then president of the U.S. In 1954,

Puerto Rican pro-independence activists participated in an attack on the U.S. House of Representatives.<sup>8</sup> The 1960s saw a worldwide radical movement that used the rhetoric of anti-colonialism to articulate its demands. In Puerto Rico, the telecommunications infrastructure was a focal point of these anti-colonial manifestations. During the 1972 live broadcast of the Miss Universe pageant, celebrated in Dorado, P.R. (the first to take place outside of the U.S. mainland), a terrorist attack to the network antennas caused a television blackout during the exact moment of the crowning of the new Miss Universe, thus making the newly elected beauty queen invisible. The aim was to give publicity to the pro-independence struggle. Another particularly violent labor strike in 1974 sparked a spate of bombings around the island, which damaged water pipelines, four Army Reserve trucks, and an International Telephone and Telegraph office building.

Senator Strom Thurmond's (1975) arguments on the connections of international communism and Puerto Rico are, therefore, telling. During hearings in the U.S. senate to investigate the Administration of the Internal Security Act, he stated:

Terrorist bombings by Puerto Rican revolutionaries, in this country and in Puerto Rico, have attracted much attention because bombings are spectacular... the bombings may have concealed a much more important aspect of the Puerto Rican situation. If the word of the Communists means anything, what this evidence suggests is that international communism has been using Puerto Rico as a bridgehead to infiltrate, disrupt and ultimately bring about revolution in the United States.<sup>9</sup>

This quote clearly identifies the extent to which the U.S. saw itself in Puerto Rico – and throughout the region – as the guardian and architect of global capitalism.

In 1978, these tensions culminated in a symbolically fraught event that occurred at a place where technology, state power, and the topography of the island stood in visible juxtaposition, at Cerro Maravilla, where the two communication towers stood. One of the towers was used by commercial television station WRIK-TV (Channel 7) and the other for federal communications. The two towers' steel girders were anchored by a one-story

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<sup>8</sup> Lolita Lebron, Rafael Cancel Miranda, Irving Flores and Andrés Figueroa Cordero attacked the United States House of Representatives on March 1, 1954. Their mission was to bring world attention to Puerto Rico's independence cause. When Lebrón's (accent used on her name here but not before) group reached the visitors' gallery above the chamber in the House, she stood up and shouted "*¡Viva Puerto Rico Libre!*" ("Long live a Free Puerto Rico!") and unfurled a Puerto Rican flag. Then the group opened fire with automatic guns.

<sup>9</sup> Retrieved from: <http://www.latinamericanstudies.org/terrorism/cuban-connection-pr-1.htm>

cement-block platform that also housed its facilities. The place was cordoned off by a rusty cyclone fence and was guarded by two dogs and a single security guard per shift. Journalist Manuel Suárez describes it thus:

along Route 139, take a right turn onto Route 143 which led to the Toro Negro State Forest, the highest point in Puerto Rico with an altitude of 4,000 feet. Atop the peak was a huge steel skeleton that rose like a needle. (13)

It is important to note, here, that Puerto Rico does not have the sovereign authority to regulate its own affairs and policies relating to the establishment of communication systems with the outside world; only the U.S. government has the absolute authority to do so. The Federal Communications Commission (FCC) is the only agency that is authorized to grant and cancel licenses regarding the establishment and operation of television and radio stations on the island. Even the Puerto Rican government, supposedly self-governing, must go through the authority of this agency in order to operate even a public station.

On the night of July 25, 1978, Carlos Soto Arriví and Arnaldo Darío Rosado, two independence activists of the Armed Revolutionary Movement (*Movimiento Revolucionario Armado*), along with undercover police officer Alejandro Gonzalez Malavé, who was posing as a fellow group member, took taxi driver Julio Ortiz Molina hostage and ordered him to drive them to the towers. They originally planned to set fire to the towers as a protest against the continuing imprisonment of Puerto Rican nationalists convicted of the 1950 assassination attempt on U.S. President Harry S. Truman and the 1954 shooting at the U.S. House of Representatives. According to Nelson, they “had decided to attack the towers because...they were the key link between federal, Puerto Rican, and commercial communications” (153). The following letter, sent by the *Movimiento Armado Revolucionario*, articulates their objective:

Armed Revolutionary Movement, White E. Commandos

Today, the 25<sup>th</sup> of July, 80 years after the Yankee invasion of Puerto Rico, members of the ARM, White Eagle Command, took over several communications antennae in the area of Toro Negro in the middle of the island. This equipment is used by the state and the federal government for their work of penetration and colonialism, by which our people are subjected to by Yankee imperialism and its local lackeys. This is one more act of war of the ARM against imperialism. (qtd in Nelson 154)

As this communication shows, attacking the towers was perceived as an act of great symbolic and tactical value to this group. However, their attack was foiled, due to the fact that the undercover police officer who had penetrated the group had informed state police officers of their plan prior to their arrival. Ultimately, the activists were ambushed and shot.

Press coverage by the national newspaper *El Mundo*, which dealt with the murder of the two young men and the eventual prosecution of the police officers who killed them, poked many holes in the official account. For example, one of the most interesting discussions questioned the police report:

Police report they planned to destroy the towers. But how would it be possible to destroy steel framed towers with the large quantity of gasoline and matches that apparently constituted the whole and sum of their equipment outside of the arms they carried? If these guys were terrorists, they seem to be of the scup count kind. (*El Mundo*, August 8, 1978)

Aside from the evidence unearthed by investigative reporting, editorials in the print media focused either on the “glorified” actions of so-called “terrorists” (i.e., sympathetic nationalist newspapers like *Claridad*) or on the “heroic” response of the police (i.e., establishment newspapers like *El Mundo*).

The very label of the crime scene as the “Case of Cerro Maravilla” deserves special attention, as it is a shorthand that submerges the human actors and their political agendas. Most of the article titles refer to the event as “Maravilla”: examples include “SIB joins probe of killings at Maravilla, police role”; “Romero says no to special Maravilla probe”; “What happened in Maravilla?”; and “Protest for the deaths in Maravilla.” Cultural Studies has given special attention to the historical sources and contemporary manifestations of concepts, ideas, and myths in specific local settings by taking “place” to describe not only a point on the globe, but also as a correlate to various sets of experiences that accrue meanings for specific groups of people (Mosco). According Nelson, “the stain of Cerro Maravilla sharply outlined preexisting territory, encompassing the history of inequality, injustice, and misunderstanding that has long characterized U.S. dealings with Puerto Rico” (1). But in making this claim, the communication towers seem to disappear into journalistic shorthand.

In this symbolic scenario, the visibility of the communication tower operated as a lure to the trap set by the police. The members of the subversive group who were thus lured into the attempt to interrupt the exercise of power (with, as journalists have pointed out, a pitifully inadequate supply of materials to burn the towers) were punished with death by the agents of the State, an act in which the mystery of power found a sensational embodiment. The towers still rise

from their place on Toro Negro, functioning as a disciplinary techno-power in the service of the U.S. However, the new disciplinary society is not necessarily one with a single and always visible technology. The new disciplinary society is one where the state controls many methods of coercion and operates them throughout many networks. This brings us to the third period of my case study, in which Puerto Rico finds itself situated in a form of empire arguably quite different than it did during the second period.

#### SHUT DOWN THE GOVERNMENT BUT TURN ON THE COMPUTER: THE GOVERNMENTAL FISCAL CRISIS OF 2006

The 2006 budget shortfall in Puerto Rico was an economic cataclysm that forced the government, for the first time in the history of the Commonwealth, to shut down all of its agencies near the end of the 2005-2006 fiscal year. According to Rafael Bernabe:

the fiscal crisis of 2006 is best understood as the dramatic end of an era, one that began in 1950 with Puerto Rico's rapid industrialization and political reorganization as a U.S. "commonwealth." The island's rapid post-war growth first faltered in the mid-1970s, and several policy initiatives since then have partially held up its cracking structure--an experiment in crisis management that is now itself in crisis. (para. 7)

The shutdown lasted for two weeks, from May 1 through May 14, 2006, leaving nearly 100,000 public employees without pay and half a million students out of school. The business sector, non-profit organizations, Puerto Rican celebrities, and the general public decried the crisis. Conventional wisdom ascribed the crisis to both colonialism and the gridlock between the Commonwealth's main opposing political parties, the Popular Democratic Party and the New Progressive Party.<sup>10</sup>

The immediate cause of this crisis was a dispute that arose when the Puerto Rican legislature (controlled by the New Progressive Party) refused to approve the budget-balancing proposals of the governor (leader of the Popular Democratic Party), which prevented the central government from raising

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<sup>10</sup> The Popular Democratic Party of Puerto Rico (Partido Popular Democrático de Puerto Rico) is a political party that supports the continuation of Puerto Rico's current status as a commonwealth of the United States. It was founded in 1938 by Luis Muñoz Marín who eventually became the first elected governor of Puerto Rico in 1952. The New Progressive Party of Puerto Rico (NPP) (Partido Nuevo Progresista de Puerto Rico) is a political party that campaigns for Puerto Rican statehood. It was founded in 1968 by an official group by the State Elections Commission of Puerto Rico. It currently controls the Puerto Rican House of Representatives and Senate.

sufficient revenue and decreasing expenditures for the 2005-2006 fiscal year. All of these political events may seem to be endogenously produced by political institutions, outside of any change in technology. However, in examining the popular reception of the crisis, it becomes evident that, in contrast to early instances of resistance by civil society to particular state malfeasance or incompetence, a new communications technology, the Internet, served here as a channel to articulate the crisis in real time.

First of all, it is important to acknowledge that at the time of the crisis in 2006, even though the penetration of Internet on the island was experiencing a moderate growth—with 35% of the population over twelve years old accessing it—all government agencies had, at that time, full access to the web. The agencies not only had an internal network that served for the purpose of exchanging email, but employees were also able to navigate the World Wide Web.<sup>11</sup> In this context, on Tuesday, April 25, 2006, 200,000 public employees received a long, exhaustive email from the governor of Puerto Rico. Here are some fragments of the communication:

Dear Public Employee:

I write to you in order to comply with a constitutional duty...to inform you that, unless the Legislature acts correctly this week, from May 1 to June 30, most government agencies would be forced to close their offices and other subsidiaries that provide services to our people. [...] Tell the state legislators to act now, to act bravely, and to act according to their conscience for the good of Puerto Rico, not like lackeys of political parties and injustice! I send you a warm hug, and may God bless you, your family, and Puerto Rico.

Kindly,  
Aníbal Acevedo Vilá  
Governor of Puerto Rico  
[My translation]

Two days after the government shutdown, Acevedo Vilá sent another message, this time to the rest of the population, firstly via the Internet and then reproduced in the print and telecommunications media as well:

I know that you also do not want to remain with arms crossed while seeing how others destroy Puerto Rico. You will ask yourself, how can I, a government employee, or a pensioned

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<sup>11</sup> Retrieved from: <http://www.isocpr.org/>

citizen, or a private employee, keep this from happening? Democracy is more than merely voting every four years. In a democracy, it is you who decide, every single day. These legislators must answer to you, and now. [...] you must order them to do so. Show them that you are in command here. Look for the names of your legislators and write them down. [...] Call them on the phone; send them a fax, write them an email [...] Seek them out. (Section of the email sent by Governor Acevedo Vilá) [My translation]

This passage is notable for the confidence with which Acevedo Vilá believes the citizenry can use the tools of the new media to participate in political deliberation beyond the traditional tools of representative democracy, i.e. voting. The governor calls for Puerto Ricans to press their legislators by means of communication technology, which included, at the time, a steadily growing Internet.<sup>12</sup> By asking the citizens to use communication technologies, particularly the Internet, the governor was ostensibly recognizing the power of citizens as agents for change in such situations. However, this call for citizens to use communication technologies for participation should be contrasted with the traditional politics of use of the Internet of the government of Puerto Rico.

It was never the aim of the e-government platform to generate citizen participation in this manner; rather, the goal was simply to reproduce, on the Internet level, the normal unidirectional flow of communication that the State has traditionally enforced, in order to preserve the hierarchical position of the executive, legislative, and judicial branches of government vis-à-vis the population. What was envisioned was the facilitation of an information system that would plug into that flow (Ley #151: Gobierno Electronico, 2004).<sup>13</sup> Unexpectedly, however, this set up a system with unpredictable feedback that could be captured by the population because, in fact, the Internet was not a unidirectional media, like television or radio. Rather, the Internet was from the beginning an interactive media, with content provided by end-users as well as by state and corporate content providers. This event saw the transformation in the dynamics of communication as centralized information flow gave way to a passionate decentralized dialogue.

On the same day that Governor Acevedo sent his email manifesto, a massive email chain announced the creation of the portal *Puerto Rico Grita* (Puerto Rico Shouts).<sup>14</sup> This website was created by interested individuals and

<sup>12</sup> For example, between 2005 and 2012, the penetration of the Internet on the island grew by 20%.

<sup>13</sup> Retrieved from: <http://www.lexjuris.com/lexlex/leyes2004/lex12004151.htm>

<sup>14</sup> The website [www.prgrita.com](http://www.prgrita.com) is no longer available to the public. However, screenshots from the website are available on: <http://www.screenshots.com/prgrita.com/2009-03-27>

sponsored by the private media, not the government-controlled media.<sup>15</sup> The website exhorted the community to participate in a self-proclaimed mass movement. The email read as follows:

Send this page to everyone you know. We are sending thousands of email chains, but this is our opportunity to tell the world that Puerto Rico Shouts. Let everyone know about this movement; give us your feedback; let it all out; and let's work together for a better Puerto Rico. Send this page to your legislators so that they can be aware of your opinion. We will also communicate and work together so that this page can enter history as the people's voice and the medium for measuring the people's discontent with the country's situation. (Email fragment, 27 April 2006) [My translation]

The website not only served as a channel to spread the message, it also served to bring together online and offline dimensions. The portal included not only specific details of the event, but also added the novelty of Google Maps, then only one year old. On Friday, April 28, 2006, about 50,000 people of all political ideologies, dressed in white shirts as a symbol of solidarity, responded to the email's call by gathering at the Convention Center premises in Isla Grande and marching to the capitol building to demand that the legislature and the executive branch make a compromise to end the crisis (Cordero).

A plethora of opinion pieces emerged in the political sphere of the Puerto Rican online realm, finding voice in portals, electronic forums, and more formal spaces, such as Indymediapr.<sup>16</sup> Also, a "shout" of protest with a touch of humor got passed on through email chains in Puerto Ricans. For example:

I rarely ask for this type of help, but today, the situation is worth it. A commando of "warriors" announced last night that they will kidnap a group of senators and representatives from the three political parties. They are asking for a \$3,000,000 ransom. If the money is not paid within 24 hours, they will soak the politicians with fuel and burn them. We are collecting valuables and need your help! ...So far, we have 200 gallons of regular unleaded

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<sup>15</sup> The radio station Salsoul was the main sponsor of the portal [www.pgrta.com](http://www.pgrta.com).

<sup>16</sup> Indymedia is a democratic media outlet for the creation of radical, accurate, and passionate tellings of truth." (There's no open quote.) Indymedia was founded as an alternative to government and corporate media and seeks to facilitate people being able to publish their media as directly as possible.

gasoline, 50 gallons of premium unleaded gasoline, 120 liters of diesel, 75 of kerosene, 302 matchboxes, and 210 lighters.  
Hurry up before they are liberated!  
(Email received on April 29, 2006)

Such carnivalesque and anonymous texts tend to appear spontaneously at moments of crisis; interestingly, the same kind of scabrous humor that accompanied the peasant revolts of the early modern era emerged on the Internet. However, it is important to recognize that this kind of “email folklore”<sup>17</sup> is formulated within a different temporal and technological landscape. While a pamphlet or graffiti reached its audience within the old pre-industrial rhythms of production, email folklore is produced and processed in real time, is shared by a mass audience, and triggers responses with the same distribution and immediacy. This creates communities of interest with a new temporal horizon and a new sense of possibilities, who form, in their very presence, an ambient potential political power. Using combinations of flattery and intimidation, threat and promise, these email forwards create immediate responses and, as in this case, contrast strongly with the cumbersome machinery of institutional politics.

This phenomenon seems to correspond to points made by García-Canclini in his book on hybrid culture and social mobilization. Because, García-Canclini claims, the efficacy of social movements depends on their ability to seize and reorganize the public space: social mobilization is necessarily coupled with the state-of-the-art communication technology. Print technologies are faster than oral ones; accordingly, interactive digital communications are faster still. Thus, “the massive use of the city for political theatricalization [was] reduced” when the communication media depended upon slower than real-time events manipulated by the political establishment. He adds:

The power grows if they act in mass networks: not only the urban presence of a demonstration of one or two hundred thousand persons, but –even more– their capacity to interfere with the normal functioning of a city and find support, for that very reason, in the electronic information media. (García-Canclini 260)

The crisis of 2006 demonstrated García-Canclini’s thesis; the Internet became an important channel through which Puerto Rican citizens communicated and were communicated to during a crisis that shut down public services upon which they depended. In other words, the social and collective meaning of the crisis was

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<sup>17</sup> The concept of email folklore is introduced by Marjorie Kibby.

interpreted through, and thus mediated by, the online communicative sphere. As García-Canclini writes:

Urban Culture is restructured by giving up its leading role in the public space to electronic technologies. Given that almost everything in the city “happens” thanks to the fact that the media say so [...] there is an accentuation of social mediatization [...] and political actions are constituted as so many images of the political. (260)

This was written in 1995, when utopian theses about the Internet were widespread. Since then, the techno-political pessimists have been criticizing these theories, especially for the assumption that the Internet automatically has democratizing effects. Issues concerning information overload, centralization, the filtering and monitoring of authoritarian countries, and the digital divide have been discussed as counter-examples to the claims of the techno-political optimists.

Yet there are still many defenders of a more modified thesis that the Internet promotes deliberative democracy, such as Yochai Benkler, who claims “the networked public sphere provides anyone with an outlet to speak, to inquire, to investigate, without need to access the resources of a major media organization.”<sup>18</sup> Benkler distinguishes a fundamental change in the ways individuals can interact with their democracy and experience their role as citizens. However, the ideal citizen he proposes relies on a specific interaction with the technology of the Internet:

They need not be limited to reading the opinions of opinion makers and judging them in private conversations. They are no longer constrained to occupy the role of mere readers, viewers, and listeners. They can be, instead, participants in a conversation. The network allows all citizens to change their relationship to the public sphere. They no longer need be consumers and passive spectators. They can become creators and primary subjects. It is in this sense that the Internet democratizes. (Benkler 272)

Yet, the challenge for this ideal citizen comes in to perspective when considering that networks are unlimited, open, highly dynamic structures in which the promise of voice often masks an impotence to effect real, offline change in the living situations of individuals. Unequal offline structures – and the media companies

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<sup>18</sup> Retrieved from: [http://cyber.law.harvard.edu/wealth\\_of\\_networks/Bulleeted\\_Chapter\\_1](http://cyber.law.harvard.edu/wealth_of_networks/Bulleeted_Chapter_1)

and governments who have strong places in the Internet – do not necessarily budge in the face of “conversation.”

My analysis of the politically induced breakdown of Puerto Rico’s public services and its Internet response does not imply that either sending an email or creating a basic website are congruent with the more utopian notion of a networked public sphere proposed by Benkler. However, even if Benkler’s vision seems idealistic, other observers have acknowledged the difference made by the web. If, according to Khan and Kellner, “Internet politics can serve as a ‘soft activism’ that provides an illusion of political action through typing on a computer,” they still argue “for a critical/reconstructive approach that...break[s] with the logic of capital and that advance[s] oppositional politics” (720). In their scenario, the project of information and communication technologies supported political activism gives us a linkage between the online and the offline realm. In the case of the 2006 shutdown, this symbiosis put pressure on the legislature and was at least one factor in bringing the crisis to a close when the Puerto Rican legislature approved an emergency bond to finance the country’s \$740 million shortfall. Having won approval by the legislature, the governor signed the budget into law on May 13 and officially ended the shutdown. The Internet, which was originally conceived as a disembodied space freed from the offline world was, indeed, embodied by the claims of the Puerto Ricans against the so-called burden of colonialism.

#### CONCLUSION: THE UNEXPECTED POLITICAL DYNAMICS OF TECHNOLOGY

The three events analyzed here occurred against a colonial background, as, indeed, Puerto Rico has been a colony since it was established by the Spanish regime. The first event occurred while the Spanish were still the colonial masters of the island; the others represent two different moments in the 110 years that Puerto Rico has been an American colony under the ambiguous coloring of a “commonwealth.” In each of the events, we see how technology can be used as an instrument of colonialism. The street lamps represented the positivist urban reform of the late nineteenth century Hispanic-Criollo culture, which were advertised as a civilizing project. The incident at the communication towers served as a microcosm of the violence at the base of the disciplinary power embodied in the link between the State and the U.S. federal government. Finally, the use of the Internet produced an inflection in our narrative of technological change and provided an instrument of popular resistance through a technology that gave an expanded power to the user. It turned out, technology could be turned against the traditional providers of media content and the governing class to successfully communicate popular discontent with the state of the economy of the colony at the beginning of the new millennium. At the same time, all of these

incidents occurred, as it were, on the margins of the trajectory of these technologies, as each was used to capture the discontent of the colonized.

The street lamps in Old San Juan were the direct target for a semi-Luddite attack against Spain. Even though in the Cerro Maravilla case the communication towers were never physically assaulted, that they were used successfully by police agents as a lure shows the powerful aura that enfolded them in Puerto Rican history. This case casts doubt on the competence and objectivity of the federal authorities and their relationships with the locals. The networks that tower represented should be better addressed not only as tools to “discipline” the Puerto Rican population, but also as a key hub in the U.S. imperial network of telecommunications systems that could be used to discipline the entire region. During the fiscal crisis, Puerto Ricans turned on their computers not only to be informed about the happenings, but also to push against the deadlocked discourse of the political class. In this regard, Poster would argue that “the political discourse has long been mediated by electronic machines: the issue now is that the machines enable new forms of decentralized dialogue and create new combinations of human-machine assemblages, new individual and collective voices...which are the new building blocks of political formations and groupings” (182).

In conclusion, from 1898 onwards we can consider “Puerto Rico” as a technology in itself. This is in part because the “political-economic, military, and cultural-national/racial discursive cluster fashioned entire regions of the world (including Puerto Rico) as problems to be solved and as stretches of (empty) land to be seeded by the ‘advanced races’ who embodied the highest stage of cultural, economic, technological, and social evolution” (Santiago-Valles 25). Santiago-Valles quotes Nelson, the journalist who wrote about the Cerro Maravilla case, as employing an old, banal metaphor: “Puerto Rico could serve as the-long-needed bridge of understanding between Latin America and United States” (Santiago-Valles 86). Instead of a bridge of understanding, however, since 1898, U.S. policy has considered Puerto Rico in terms of geopolitical and military strategy and as a depot for cheap labor. At the end of the nineteenth century, the island became essential to the extension of U.S. influence over Latin America in general and the Caribbean in particular. The invasion and acquisition of Puerto Rico, which guarded the eastern approaches of the Caribbean Sea, was tied to the project of building the Panama Canal under American supervision to connect the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans. According to Grosfuguel and Georas, the idea was also “to make Puerto Rico a symbolic showcase of the U.S. capitalist model of development for the Third World” (106). The so-called “laboratory of Puerto Rico” (Briggs 18) served as center stage for population control, the wonders of decision-making using a centralized state apparatus, and a rising standard of living. Based on this discussion, I have attempted to show how the opposition to

the control of technology by the State (whether the U.S. or the colonialist powers) served as a barometer of grassroots Puerto Rican discontent.

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