

## **SIMULATIONS: FLAGS, THE INTERNET, AND EMERGENT TECHNOLOGIES**

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In the 33 years since the first public demonstration of the early ARPANET system, the Internet has proliferated, expanding its use and influence around this entire planet and, many say, creating a "digital divide" with profound economic and cultural ramifications separating those on and offline throughout the world. (1) Because of its profound impact on how information is accessed and disseminated in recent decades, it is not surprising that practitioners of vexillology began to evaluate the Internet's influence on their particular field of study. In the past ten years, two very general and opposing viewpoints have emerged: one side celebrates how this medium offers the twofold blessing of global outreach and easier access to information while the other cautiously warns about the erosion of quality standards in the acceptance and use of reference sources. (2)

Both positions make some valid points: the Internet does of course offer incredible potential for outreach, and that potential can be seriously damaged, from a scholarly perspective, if the information presented on a webpage is inaccurate or unsubstantiated. Furthermore, when the purpose of a webpage (or for that matter, an organization) moves from analyzing flag usage to prescribing it or aesthetically ranking flags, then I would say the website (or for that matter, the organization) has crossed the line from flag studies into flag promotion, a blurry line that has been a concern for vexillology since its beginnings. As far back as 1985 at an annual meeting of the North American Vexillological Association, George Cahill of the National Flag Foundation accepted use of the term "patriotic articulators" to distinguish those promoting flags for political reasons from true vexillologists who wish to study flags for academic reasons (3) -- perhaps the phrase "aesthetic articulators" could be used to describe those engaged in the ranking of flags using codified value systems, a practice of growing popularity in flag studies groups in the past few years.

In any case, discussions combining vexillology and the Internet invariably keep circling back to how vexillologists use the World Wide Web to procure or convey reference material. A useful summation of both the benefits and pitfalls of the Internet as a place to locate academic information on flags, what he calls "cybervexillology", can be found in section 1.2.4 of Peter Orenski's "essay on the state and future of vexillology," *Quo Vadimus*. (4) Therein he documents the quality control philosophy and achievements of the Flags of the World website. Orenski's concern is how vexillology is practiced and represented in cyberspace. I would like to change the emphasis in the word "cybervexillology" to shift its meaning from "a group of vexillology websites" to "*the study of flag representations* as found in cyberspace and other modern communication technologies." Given all the time people spend using the Internet, I believe social and yes, even conceptual shifts are occurring in the ways people interpret, respond to, and use flags. The Internet, like other technologies that deserve our evaluation, not only changes the way we learn about flags, it affects the very ways we understand and use them.

An appreciation that new technologies might change the ways we perceive and demonstrate both individual and collective identities is well grounded in academic discourse. In *Orality and Literacy*, Walter Ong argued that when Europe shifted from an oral to a print culture, it also emphasized new ways of thinking, leaving behind the repetition and directness favored by oral traditions for modes of discourse emphasizing precision and complex analysis. (5) David Olsen built on this in his subsequent work, *The World on Paper*, when he argued that the shift from an oral to a print culture also changes the way individual identity is psychologically perceived. (6) Neil Postman maintained that the shift from print culture to television was the main trigger for the ongoing loss of childhood

in contemporary society (7) and Kenneth Gergen brought the topic area forward to assess the changes in an individual's sense of personal identity wrought by the proliferation of the Internet.

Gergen's thesis is that because of the postmodern shift to a society based on communication through modern technologies, "the concept of the self as an integral, bounded agent is slowly becoming untenable." (8) Gergen identifies four tendencies in the modern age of information: polyvocality, plasticity, de-authentication, and commodification of the self. These work together to erode the individual's integrated sense of self in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

*Polyvocality:* a person is capable of holding many, often conflicting, views, values, and sentiments

*Plasticity:* a person readily and regularly adapts and shifts to new locations, demands, activities, and practices

*De-authentication:* a person loses any sense of originality, inundated by information overload that suggests all actions and responses are clichéd or copied from somewhere else

*Commodification of the self:* a person's identity becomes just another element to modify, package, market, and sell in corporate consumer culture (9)

How does this connect to flags? Well, I see many flags as markers of collective identities. If individual sense of a stable, integrated self is truly eroding in our globalizing world, and time spent on the Internet and in other such simulated realities accelerates this erosion process, then collective identities will be affected adversely as well. From this perspective, outbreaks of nationalism in recent decades that have embraced flags as icons of distinctive group identity can be seen as reactionary responses to larger economic and cultural forces at work in the juggernaut of postmodern globalization. (10)

I am interested in studying how flags can serve as a conduit to understanding the dynamics and ramifications of social change. Given Gergen's thoughtful argument on the impact of the Internet and other communication technologies, I propose we pay more attention to how flags' meanings and uses are affected by these technologies, and what role flags play in this now global struggle of forces affecting an individual's sense of self or committed identity to a group. We should approach the study of flags in the modern world as markers of *identities-in-flux* in the context of this ongoing globalization process; we should be evaluating how flags are helping those dedicated to maintaining or strengthening integrated senses of self as this erosion of the integrated self occurs across cultures and societies. One way to do that would be to give more analytical attention to flag usage on the Internet and in other modern communication technologies such as video games, virtual reality, streaming television and cinema. (11)

To aid in this endeavor, we should set up some basic levels of distinction to help us differentiate how the flag symbols are functioning so we may begin to assess their influence. Here are three general tips to get us started.

1. Distinguish between cloth flag encounters and simulation flag encounters.
2. Distinguish between valid flags and parsed flags.
3. Distinguish between simulated flag representations and simulated flag interactions.

## 1. Distinguish between cloth flag encounters and simulation flag encounters.

When approaching modern communication systems with a goal of cultural analysis, we can benefit from the insights French philosopher Baudrillard put forth in his classic work *Simulacra and Simulations*. He noted that our perceptions of reality are socially constructed, and that as we increasingly encounter simulations, we begin to have perceptions of reality based on simulated reality, which he calls "hyperreality." (12). He saw the world in the 1970s as already awash in simulations of simulations, what he dubbed "the simulacra." Baudrillard warned this postmodern condition leads to apathy. In many ways, his philosophical position correlates with the social psychology description of postmodernism that Gergen gives us. To see if there is value in adopting this paradigm for analyzing flag usage and meaning in the modern world, flag studies should start to differentiate more carefully between rituals and ceremonies social groups perform with actual cloth flags and the number and types of encounters people have with simulated flags, such as flags in photographs, on television, in movies, in video games, or online. Here are some concerns we might raise: If people are spending more and more time in simulated realities, are they having fewer encounters with actual fabric flags? Does the impact of the icon dilute as it goes through levels of simulation? Are simulated flag encounters a helpful supplement to cloth flag encounters in the teaching of patriotic respect for a flag? Could simulated flag encounters effectively replace cloth flag encounters in such a teaching process? By starting to distinguish when and how people encounter simulated flags as opposed to cloth flags, and then setting up some studies for feedback on how they interpret and respond to those encounters, we might begin to get some answers.

## 2. Distinguish between valid flags and parsed flags.

Since flags are symbols, often multilayered in their meanings and what they evoke, elements or portions of flags may come to convey the meaning of the complete flag to viewers who glimpse the elements, and if not always convey the multilayered meanings in their full complexity, at least convey a suggestion of them, often on a more subtle level. Bunting can serve the function of a parsed flag in this regard. The parsed flag, a segment or portion of the flag that triggers a semiotic connection to the more complete symbol, often supplements and substitutes for that symbol in advertising, in art, and a range of other modes of visual discourse.

Parsed flags are often overlooked or underestimated by those studying flags, as vexillologists are sometimes adamant that flags need to be represented following legally specified rules of design or color use. Such an exacting emphasis disallows the prudent and necessary evaluation of the very real semiotic impact parsed flags may have on those who encounter them. In their anthropological analysis of the bellicose war-culture built up around the American flag, *Blood Sacrifice and the Nation*, Carolyn Marvin and David W. Ingle point out the pervasive presence and influence of parsed national flags for those living in the United States. (13) Parsed flags need to be identified and studied in the influential modern technologies that surround us. Peter Hart, Media Analyst for FAIR (Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting), commenting on the propaganda techniques employed by the graphics department of Fox News Network to use blatant punditry to blur for their audience the line between balanced facts and neoconservative ideological commentary, said "They pioneered the use of the American flag as an icon for their news." (14) Parsed flags can also be used to ridicule or question nationalism or ideology, such as in the red, white, and blue "shop at Huckabees" advertising promotion actress Naomi Watts' character shoots in the 2004 film *I ♥ Huckabees* (before she encounters the consciousness-raising experience of existentialism). (15) On the Internet, parsed flags might serve as indicators of alternative language web pages, but we should also watch for them as wall paper, or as background illustrations, while in video games they could powerfully convey embedded ideological stances and stereotypes.

### 3. Distinguish between simulated flag representations and simulated flag interactions.

Just as reading a book requires a different sort of intellectual engagement than viewing a film version of that book, or listening to an audiocassette version of that book, for that matter so does encountering information through varying new technologies call for different types of intellectual engagement. One of the true benefits offered by many modern technologies is the opportunity for greater interaction with the information source. Hyperlinking offers an Internet reader a mode of reading that jumps around in ways more traditional reading does not. As websites, video, and computer games become increasingly sophisticated and software possibilities advance, more and more opportunities emerge for users to take on active roles in the process of taking in the information. Video or computer game avatars that offer a wide range of mutable representations for the player thus concisely demonstrate polyvocality, plasticity, and de-authentication at work.

How might one "interact" with a flag online? Well, an intriguing website that offers simulated flag interactions can be found at [www.potatoland.org](http://www.potatoland.org), a URL first identified for vexillologists by John Purcell in the December 2004 issue of *FlaGWAVer*. (16) This website has a section called *net.flag*, which is a work of art commissioned by the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York for acquisition into their permanent collection. Although artist Mark Napier first conceived and fully oversaw the production of this website, he was aided in this activity by editor and researcher Liza Sabater, research assistant Josep Arimany Piella, and Java programmer Zach Lieberman. (17)

The message of *net.flag* is that, thanks to the Internet, national boundaries and identities no longer mean what they once did. As Napier puts it, "early adaptors have had an unprecedented [sic] freedom to explore new concepts of national and personal identity in the distributed geography of the net." The website encourages visitors to play with and modify elements from 118 different national flags, to create and suggest new visual and semiotic messages that convey the site visitor's mood, concern, or sense of aesthetics or identification at any given moment. The large group of national flags is supplemented in the interaction area with 22 shape addition options, 26 color modification options, and 36 symbolic meaning options (ranging alphabetically from "agriculture" to "wealth" and listing representative national flags said to convey those values). Interacting with such a very wide range of possible permutations and combinations, the visitor can add, delete, and move around elements, and then if he wants, submit the momentary creation to a stored archive that continues to grow, should anyone care to view ephemeral creations of earlier site visitors. Napier asserts "The resulting flag is both an emblem and a micro territory in it's [sic] own right, a place for confrontation, assertion, communication and play." (18) I would suggest that the *net.flag* website models the very point of my talk today: the Internet is ushering in a time when fixed identities will be challenged and flags, as traditional markers of fixed identity will be used in interesting and intriguing ways by different groups and individuals to help fight this challenge or perhaps, more complexly, abet it. The online exhibit catalogue for the Guggenheim reinforces this point: it explains *net.flag's* genesis as Napier's reaction to the proliferation of American flags displayed in the USA immediately following the 9/11 attacks, but adds "long before September 11, the Internet had done more 'damage' to flags than merely pixelating their components. Global trade, facilitated by telecommunication and e-commerce, disintegrated national borders. In the months following the attacks, nationalistic fervor increasingly gave way to the realization that isolated sovereignty was untenable in a global economy." (19)

Besides *net.flag*, the Internet and other modern technologies provide a wide range of other interactions with flags that deserve study as well. To cite just one example, *lovepeoplenotmoney.com* encourages visitors to burn a cyberspace representation of the American flag online and then briefly write about why they did so. (20) If a flag desecration amendment ever was to make its way into the Constitution of the United States, I wonder if visitors going online while located within the boundaries of the United States who then click the incineration on this page would or should be found guilty for the same offense. Hmmmm.....

## CONCLUSION

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century context of globalization and ongoing erosion of the integrated self, vexillology should adopt a paradigm for analysis that evaluates the power and function of national flags and other such patriotic symbols in light of these key factors. In moving past simply describing and classifying flags to the more significant task of assessing their influence and function, we should be mindful that personal and collective identities are not fixed and modern technologies will play an increasingly influential role in the dissemination and manipulation of flag representations and interactions.

There are many ways to approach this. One example is a writing assignment I gave students taking an interdisciplinary freshman level seminar on the Culture of Patriotism in the fall of 2003, a copy of which is included in the appendix. (21) I devised an exercise in which they had to visit a web ring devoted to 9/11 memorials, select a particularly moving or noteworthy site from among that number, and evaluate how American flags and other civil religious imagery were represented and evoked on that site. Students had to integrate an evaluation of how the World Wide Web affects them as a communications tool with a discussion of the site's hierarchal distinctions, interplay, and meanings of such symbols as the American flag, a crying bald eagle, the Twin Towers, and, quite often, a depiction of Jesus Christ (the latter offering an excellent opportunity to deal with questions of the overlap or separation of church and state in American culture). I wanted my students to begin to see how the Internet and other modern technologies are changing the ways we encounter flags, while keeping them focused on the need to evaluate the function and influence of flags in human societies. I hope this brief introduction to the topic begins to do the same for all of you. Thank you.

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## NOTES

- 1) See, for instance, Pippa Norris, W, Lance Bennett, and Robert M. Entman, *Digital Divide: Civic Engagement, Information Poverty, and the Internet Worldwide* (New York: Cambridge UP, 2001). See also Mark Warschauer, *Technology and Social Inclusion: Rethinking the Digital Divide* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2003).
- 2) These were the two main currents in the roundtable discussion I chaired at the annual meeting of the North American Vexillological Association in Quebec City, 10 October 1998, entitled "The Internet and the Future of Vexillology," and they continue to crop up at talking points in vexillology on the internet discussions today.
- 3) Scot M. Guenter, *The American Flag 1776-1924: Cultural Shifts from Creation to Codification* (Rutherford, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson UP, 1990), 220, n.55.
- 4) Peter J. Orenski, *Quo Vadimus: An Essay on the State and Future of Vexillology* (privately printed by author, 2003 edition), 29-35.
- 5) Walter Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (New York: Routledge 2002; original ed. London: Methuen 1982):
- 6) David Olsen, *The World on Paper* (New York: Cambridge UP, 1994).
- 7) Neil Postman, *The Disappearance of Childhood* (New York: Delacorte, 1982).
- 8) Kenneth J. Gergen, "The Self in the Age of Information," *Washington Quarterly* 23.1 (Winter 2000) as accessed in Social Sciences Full Text database, San José State University Library, San José State University, 11 May 2005, [www.sjlibrary.org](http://www.sjlibrary.org).
- 9) Gergen.
- 10) Fred Halliday, "Nationalism," Ch. 20 in *The Globalization of World Politics: An Introduction to International Relations*, Eds. John Baylis and Steve Smith, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed (New York: Oxford UP, 2001) 440-455.
- 11) The amount of time millions of people around the planet spend interacting in these various simulated realities is far greater than many people not involved realize. Just in the United States, the videogame industry retail sales topped \$9 billion in 2004 alone. Douglas Lowenstein, president of the Entertainment Software Association, says "No other entertainment industry has posted the sustained growth over the last decade generated by the videogame sector, and given the technological and creative advances ahead, all signs point to surging growth and more record sales for many years to come." A well conceived and thorough analysis of flag usage in these video games that millions of young people (mostly male) are spending many hours repetitively playing could provide some interesting new data on how flags are subtly influencing or reinforcing values and beliefs in contemporary culture. See "Annual U.S. Video Games Statistics," *About.com*, 24 May 2005 [http://retailindustry.about.com/seg\\_toys/a/bl\\_npd012703\\_p.htm](http://retailindustry.about.com/seg_toys/a/bl_npd012703_p.htm)

12) Jean O. Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulations: The Body, In Theory: Histories of Cultural Materialism*. Trans. Sheila Faria Glaser (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1995).

13) Carolyn Marvin and David W. Ingle, *Blood Sacrifice and the Nation: Totem Rituals and the American Flag* (New York: Cambridge UP, 1999).

14) *Outfoxed: Rupert Murdoch's War on Journalism*. DVD. Produced and directed by Robert Greenwald. 2004.

15) *I ♥ Huckabees*. Directed by David O. Russell. Independent film. 2004.

16) John Purcell, "New Flags for the Internet," *FlaGWA*Ver 9.2 (Dec. 2004): 7-8.

17) Mark Napier, *Potatoland*. <http://www.potatoland.org/> Click on <net.flag>.

18) Napier. Another lesson about the Internet can be gleaned from the punctuation and spelling errors in the two Napier quotes here: there is no guarantee websites will have correct spelling, grammar, punctuation, or even information, just because they are available in cyberspace. I find it a bit surprising and disheartening to find such obvious typos on a webpage commissioned as "a work of art" by the prestigious Guggenheim Museum.

19) InternetArt Commissions for 2002. *Guggenheim.org* 15 May 2005

What's in a Flag: Mark Napier's *net.flag*: A Nagging Problem

[http://www.guggenheim.org/internetart/internetart\\_index.html](http://www.guggenheim.org/internetart/internetart_index.html)

20) You can visit the "Burn the American Flag" web ring at

<http://s.webring.com/hub?ring=burntheflag> .

For the particular webpage discussed here, go to

<http://www.lovepeoplenotmoney.com/burn.html> .

21) This was an experimental freshman level course intended to introduce students to the university and the seminar mode of analysis in a small group context (about fifteen students). The course met a Letters requirement and explored the Culture of Patriotism as it evolved historically in the United States of America. Vexillology was a major component of the course.

SAN JOSE STATE UNIVERSITY  
THE CULTURE OF PATRIOTISM  
MUSE CLASS FALL 2003 \*\* PROFESSOR GUENTER

PAPER #2: USE OF CIVIL RELIGION ON INTERNET WEBSITES

Assignment date: Monday, 29 September

Due date: Monday, 27 October

Length: 4 or more pages typed, double spaced, standard margins

This assignment calls for the perusal of several internet websites dedicated as memorials to 9/11. I will give you some suggestions for probing a range of sites on the Net and you are welcome to find and use more through your surfing and searching. Zero in on one particular website that uses civil religion to convey its message. *Your job will be to summarize and then analyze how the site uses civil religion.* After defining civil religion and establishing the importance of both civil religion and the Internet in contemporary American society, your introduction should clarify what site you selected and why. Always keep in mind the central focus upon the American flag as the most powerful symbol in American civil religion.

Be sure to address the following points in the body of your paper:

- Layout of the webpage, use of text, visuals, graphics, colors, "bells and whistles," hyperlinks, etc.
- Who does the target audience seem to be? Basis of this opinion?
- How and why are various civil religious icons utilized? What evocations are they trying to stimulate by these representations?
- Are any religious (such as Christian) icons also included? What do you make of any blurring of religious/civil religious boundaries?
- Personally, how does this memorial affect you? What emotional response(s) does it stir up and why? Would you have responded differently two years ago or not, and if so, why?
- After analyzing the page's effect upon you, briefly compare it to others in the genre you perused before you settled upon it as your focus.

In your conclusion, move from a reflection upon the contribution and function of 9/11 websites for American civil religion to some reflections upon how 9/11 has affected American society, and what this might suggest for our civil religion as the 21<sup>st</sup> century continues.

If you want to use any Figures or Images from the site in your analysis, include them in an appendix, title them and number them (e.g., Fig. 1. Statue of Liberty in Tears) and refer to them directly in the text of your essay followed by a parenthetical reference, such as (see Figure 3).

As previously instructed, remember to check your rough draft for typos and errors in spelling, grammar, punctuation. Make all such corrections before submitting your clean final copy at the beginning of class on the appropriate day. Recall the point to focus upon improving you wrote down just before you submitted paper #1, and be sure to give that point adequate attention this time. Follow the established procedure for title pages, numbering pages, and requesting any possible extensions, should that issue come up. Good luck with this and happy web surfing!

To get started, try **9/11 memorial** or **9/11 tribute** in google.com and see what you get.

Here's a webring of 9/11 sites: <http://www.ringsurf.com/netring?ring=sept112001;action=list>  
(if you have trouble copying this URL, e-mail me and I will send it in the blue hyperlink format)

Here's a site replete with patriotic information and links.

<http://gba.wavethemes.net/index.html>

(Proceed with caution: some parts take a long time to load. Lots of audio connections if you are interested, though)

DO NOT ANALYZE THIS PARTICULAR SITE FOR THE ASSIGNMENT, but use it as a reference now and later for many elements of the Culture of Patriotism.



**Scot M. Guenter** is Professor and Coordinator of American Studies at San José State University in California. He is immediate past president of the California American Studies Association, a former president of the North American Vexillological Association, founding editor of *Raven: a Journal of Vexillology*, and a Laureate of FIAV. In 2006 he co-edited with Stanislav Kolar *Considering America from Inside and Out: A San Jose/Ostrava Dialogue Sharing Perspectives*. (University of Ostrava Press).