Tamilnet.com: Some Reflections on Popular Anthropology, Nationalism, and the Internet

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Abstract

In this essay I argue that Tamilnet.com, an Internet news agency put together by a group of Sri Lankan Tamils to address the Tamil diaspora and influence English-speaking elites, subverted international news coverage during Sri Lanka's civil war by making "ironic" use of the discursive styles of journalism and anthropology. I also claim that this constituted a particular form of autoethnographic popular anthropology that challenged professional anthropology, and in some ways sought to replace it. In the first two sections of this essay, I dismantle the concept of "the popular" by showing that when anthropologists and social theorists use the term they are often referring to connected but distinct aspects of popularity which should be distinguished: Baudrillardian market popularity on the one hand, and Habermasian identity-resistance popularity on the other. I then show how the Internet, given its technology and software, is best seen as market popular in form but identity-resistance popular in content. In the remaining four sections I illustrate, ethnographically, how the creators of Tamilnet.com, while deeply embedded in civil war and a world-wide diaspora, recognized this aspect of the Internet and used it—again, "ironically"—to construct a site that advances their own nationalist interests. [ethnography, Internet, autoethnography, popular anthropology, journalism, irony, nationalism, Sri Lanka, Tamil, diaspora, agency, Toronto]

Introduction

This is a story about a small group of Sri Lankan Tamil people who have devised a way to use the Internet to talk about their community to the world at large.[1] They have done this by creating an Internet news agency, Tamilnet.com that subtly subverts international journalistic practices by, rather surprisingly, emulating them exactly. In so doing they have produced a kind of strategic communal self-description that I will argue is genuinely "autoethnographic," in Mary Louise Pratt's sense of that term (1992), in that it consists of a systematic attempt by members of a disempowered community to represent itself to a hegemonic other—in this case, the Western media—in terms the hegemon can accept.[2] I also believe that it provides a clear example of a particular form of "popular anthropology." Their case is an interesting one, I think, because it suggestively illustrates a kind of politically generative 'popular anthropology' that may ultimately transform anthropology as a whole, and that has certainly altered my own anthropological practice in unexpected ways. Hence most of this essay will focus on the story of Tamilnet.com and the community that created it. This paper, however, is really but a part of my 20 years of research into how a nationalist project—in this case the Sri Lankan Tamil desire for a separate state—has persevered despite often intense national, international, "globa," and, sometimes, even internal Tamil pressure to cease. My larger purpose, therefore, is to use this ethnographic case to clarify how the Internet, given its unique characteristics as an ethnographic site, has allowed Sri Lankan Tamil nationalists to speak effectively and subversively to the globalizing world. My argument, hence, is that the Internet makes a certain kind of 'popular anthropology' possible, and perhaps even likely.

Some Preliminary Weeding

The phrase "popular anthropology," of course, begs the question of what, anthropologically speaking, constitutes "popularity." And divining popularity is trickier than it first appears. If we look at the way recent ethnographers, such as Berdahl (1999:87) and Phillips (1999:47) have used the term "popular" in their ethnographies, one finds two, quite different, meanings often occurring in close proximity to each other that I think it is important to distinguish. *Thus, on the one hand, the term "popular" is often used to refer to cultural products crafted for mass commercial appeal.* This is, of course, the meaning the term takes in such usages as "pop culture," "popular media," and, that ulti-

mate marker of scholarly disdain, "popularization." Drastically reconsidered, this is also the kind of 'popularity' that Baudrillard so worries about—the market-driven popularity of simulacra and simulation, of hyperreality and the implosion of meaning (1997). *On the other hand, the term popular is also used to refer to cultural products that occur, like graffiti or "popular religion," outside officially established structures (including academic ones) and in the languages and forms of everyday life.* Here one would tend to include not only the sorts of practices that used to be called "folk," but also, I think, such "populist" mass movements and politics as occur outside the parameters laid down by local hegemonic practices.

Of course, with regard to movements that fall under this second meaning of 'popular', it is important to realize that their politics can be of almost any ideological kind. Hence, on the one hand, figures such as Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King, and Nelson Mandela, all led "popular" political movements that conventional Western opinion now generally admires—now, that is, that their movements are ex post facto, and all three men are safely out of power or dead. A somewhat silly example of this kind of popularity, however, though no less valid, was provided in 1998 in the U.S. by the election of Jesse Ventura, a former professional wrestler, as Governor of Minnesota. And now, of course, we have Arnie![3] Moreover, there are plenty of "populist" movements and figures that are clearly generally regarded as negative and tragic: Juan Peron and his Peronistas, Adolph Hitler and his National Socialists, and the vicious populism of the American Ku Klux Klan. In other words: "populism" of this sort is a relatively neutral form into which politics of various sorts can fit. Hence, a more relevant example for us, and very much more ambivalent politically than any of the above movements or people, is provided by the rise and sanguinary progress of Tamil-ethnic nationalism within the confines of a Sri Lankan state that is dominated by a large, equally ethnically conscious, Sinhalese majority. In this case, Tamil populism has asserted itself in the face of a rival Sinhalese populism, leading to, as we shall see, almost two decades of civil war. So here, of course, we are dealing with the kind of popularity of grave concern to philosophers such as Jurgen Habermas and Charles Taylor; that is, the kind of identity-asserting, and resistance-driven, popularity which constitutes an attempt to maintain, enter, alter, or perhaps create an entirely alternative public sphere (Habermas 1989, Taylor 1995:259).[4]

These are, then, surely, two different forms of popularity. Of course, post-structuralists such as Baudrillard tend to argue that market popularity has swallowed up all other forms and languages of popularity; this is the mean-

ing of his despairing claim, in his latter writings, that the "implosion of the Social in the Media" has left the "masses" no response save silence (Baudrillard 1988:207). Similarly, for critical theorists such as Habermas, market-popularity is but a debased form of communicative action the absurd assertions of which would be quickly exposed as such in any properly constituted "discursive democracy" (White 1995:13). Although the philosophical waters swirling beneath these contrary positions are far too deep to plumb here, what can be said, ethnographically, is that many people now live and struggle as if both forms of popularity co-exist; and that, when they do co-exist, these two forms of popularity should not be confused in our ethnographic accounts even when, as sometimes happens, they are intertwined in life. Their confusion is particularly important to avoid in such instances because it is often in the strategic interest of market-driven popularity to be mingled with and confused for the popularity of identity or resistance.[5] Just think about the various "people's awards" given on U.S. Television, or the way advertisements there will often try to infer that they are but spontaneous responses to the very public interest they are, in actuality, designed to generate (e.g., the "Pepsi generation," "be a pepper," and for us oldsters, "it's morning in America"). While this kind of confusion helps sell products—and can also, as we shall see, mask resistance—it nonetheless erodes clarity. So, to maintain an ability to disentangle such muddles—an ability we shall need in abundance in the case of Tamilnet.com—Baudrillard-style market-driven popularity shall henceforth be called, "market-popularity;" while Habermas-style and "folkish" identity or resistance driven popularity shall be called "identity-resistance popularity."

Why the hyphenated name for this latter form of popularity? Because "resistance" and 'identity' are, I would argue, two modes of the same form of popularity. Any assertion of identity—a gang's tag, a folk song, a certain kind of dress—becomes a form of resistance whenever it is noticed publicly. Of course, as Steven Feld has pointed out in his interesting writing on "world music," such assertions can also become products and, thus, forms of market popularity (1995). But this kind of commercialization is more than a shift in mode; it is a shift in what Wittgenstein would call "form of life," and thus different rules apply.[6] Why? Because market popularity is a form of public claim-making that generally assumes its audience cannot make counter-claims. Wheaties cereal commercials do not countenance or even admit the possibility of debate.[7] "Identity-resistance popularity," on the other hand, as public assertions aimed at other imagined assertors, presupposes an audience that

can and will make counter-claims. Every gang-tag challenges other tagging gangs. This is why Baudrillard, for whom all public discourse is now market-popularity, sees such discourse as a totalitarian imposition while Habermas, for whom all public discourse should be of the identity or resistance sort, sees public discourse, properly constituted, and free of repression, as the only foundation possible for a true democracy.

It is interesting, and necessary before getting into the ethnography, to think a bit about the Internet in light of this distinction between market-popularity and identity-resistance popularity. Of course, a lot has been written about the Internet in the last ten or so years, much of it speculative and rather utopian. A few anthropologists, like Hakken (2001) and Fischer (1999), have bucked this trend by trying to figure out just how an anthropology or ethnography of the Internet (or cyberspace) might work. Hence, Hakken, for instance, has made the useful point that anthropology will make its most acute interventions into discussions about cyberspace by focusing, ethnographically, on how people actually use it. And Fischer anticipated Hakken's point, I think, when he claimed several years earlier that the ethnography of cyberspace needed to be "worlding"—by which he meant, I suspect, contextualizing its descriptions in terms of theory, time, place, and language—rather than engaging in the ethe-realizing that cyberspace's virtuality seems to call forth. This is all good advice, and I shall try to put it to use in what follows.

Until recently, however, the overarching tone of the literature on cyberspace has been less ethnographic than millenarian. Here, to cite just a few examples, one would have to include theorists as disparate as Haraway imagining a post-gendered cyborg future (1991, 1996), Lash working on a new rationality for the wired world (1999), Stefik envisioning the Internet as the edge of human history (1999), Heywood making out both Internet faith and faithlessness (1999), Shapiro discerning an Internet-driven decentralization of political control, and Valocic (2000) watching a new, phoenix-like "civilizational paradigm" arising out of the ashes of old, pre-wired mythologies. This is all very dire stuff, and some of it may very well be true—though it all seems, frankly, rather less pressing now given the bursting of the 1990s tech-stock bubble (and, alas, in the U.S., many of our pension plans!). What is interesting, though, is that much of this theorizing about the Internet sees cyberspace as if it were solely (or, perhaps, only most interestingly) a domain of identity-resistance popularity. Hence, for example, for Haraway, what is most interesting and important about the Internet, and technology in general (or, at least, its imagery), is the way it allows one to alter, hide, change, and renegotiate gender identity in ways that are both

public and anonymous at the same time. This, of course, is interesting, for it creates the possibility of crafting whole new forms of sociability, whole new kinds of agency, even whole new kinds of being. Moreover, there is ample evidence—in special topic websites and chat rooms—that such developments have taken place. But it is well to remember that all this potential and actual self-and sociocreation nevertheless rests upon a Procrustean technology that is itself epistemologically active rather than neutral.

For our purposes, thus, it is very important that we not forget that cyberspace is also, and is perhaps foremost, a commercial medium. Or, rather, a medium in which much of the language, design and expression of websites—even those that are, primarily, noncommercial—are dominated by the language-games of marketing. This tendency towards a market-popular style on the net is a product of the software, search "engines," and Internet providers through which most people access cyberspace. Most people in the United States and Canada, for example, access the Internet through commercial providers such as America on Line, and use the World Wide Web to travel to those cyberspaces their media-educated interests find most alluring. Further, if they are "content providers," they must construct their websites using html, a hypertext markup language specifically designed to make sites lively, colorful, and, in the end, more commercial (Cassidy 2001:22). It is interesting and, I think, directly relevant here, to remember that in 1990 Tim Berners-Lee (then of CERN, the European Particle Physics Laboratory), who named and invented the World Wide Web by creating the Universal Resource Locator file access code, imagined it right from the beginning as a "place" that would operate like a "market economy" (21). Cyberspace, then, was designed as a cybermart.[8]

It is thus, I think, important to ponder the Internet as an ethnographic arena (a part of the "public sphere", to use Habermas's term) where both market-popularity and identity-resistance popularity are being played out, but where the dominant discursive style is, for historical reasons, market-popular. What makes cyberspace so different, then, from the rest of the capital-intensive, mass-media such as television, newspapers, radio, or cinema is not which discourse is dominant—for market-popularity is dominant in all technologically based mass forums—but, rather, that cyberspace alone is very cheap to enter. For the price of a computer and a phone line, or even by using comparable access at a public library or internet café, anyone can erect a website on the World Wide Web.[9] It is this cheapness that renders the Internet, unlike any other mass medium, open to identity-resistance popular activity

that is almost unfiltered. For there are, so far, no editors and program directors applying *market logic* to determine such content (as opposed to access via search engines and the like); and although such filtering may one day come, there are technical reasons (it would require changes in the URL access code) why it is very unlikely that it will be achieved anytime soon.[10] Of course other forms of less direct influences on content are taking place, particularly given growing concerns about pornography and a recent hardening of Western political sensibilities, particularly among conservatives in the United States. Hence, what is intensifying is service provider censorship. As Allen (2002) has pointed out, after 9/11 service providers in the United States soon "brought pressure to bear, either directly or indirectly, to effectively silence voices of opposition and dissent" (136). This has resulted, Allen claims, in many United States websites actually altering content. But this kind of content repression and redirection is not market-driven—or so I would argue anyway, given the odd, defensively identity-resistance popular patriotism prevailing in the United States immediately after 9/11. In general, and for the nonce, while the dominant style of the Internet is market-popular, market-popularity has not, and will not, control access. And it is this confluence of paradoxical characteristics—market popularity in form, identity-resistance popularity in access—that the creators of Tamilnet.com noticed, and made use of, when they created their Internet news agency in 1996.

But to see all this clearly requires, I think, first, seeing Tamilnet.com in action, and then reviewing the history of its creation. Doing the first—seeing Tamilnet.com in action—will allow us to "world" this particular bit of cyberspace in no uncertain terms, for Tamilnet.com was created as part of a Sri Lankan Tamil nationalist struggle whose concrete, sometimes bloody, consequences went on for nearly twenty years, caused well over 60,000 deaths, resulted in the distribution of over 700,000 Tamil refugees across the world, and eventually created the conditions which allowed Tamilnet.com itself to thrive (Fuglerud 1999:1).[11] Seeing Tamilnet.com against this disturbing backdrop will, at the very least, curb any temptation one might have to misconstrue the role played here by cyberspace's virtuality. Doing the second—reviewing Tamilnet.com's history—will allow us to observe how its creators designed Tamilnet.com in light of their own conclusions about a world where the dominant media seemed to them overly limited by the repressive logic of market popularity. Reviewing this history is important, I think, because it will guard against the temptation inherent in any ethnography of the popular to miss the agency of the people involved. Let me begin, however, with a

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vignette of Tamilnet.com in action. For we desperately need, I think, when discussing such apparently rarefied stuff as cyberspace, to start with the intellectual friction and moral anxiety of a concrete instance.

Tamilnet.com.

Consider, then, the following, rather ghastly news story which appeared on the web site Tamilnet.com on July 8, 2001, 13:46 GMT.

JRC RECORDS BIZARRE TORTURE BY AMPARA POLICE

The investigation Officer of the Human Rights Commission, Mr. Dharmeratnam Sritharan, visited Boosa camp recently and recorded evidence from four persons who were detained and tortured by the Counter Subversive Unit of the Police in Amparai. He said the suspects bore clear marks of torture on their bodies.

The prisoners said that a constable with the Counter Subversive Unit of the Police in Ampara had allegedly subjected them to bizarre forms of torture; that he made them eat cow dung and the vomit of fellow prisoners; that he urinated into the mouth of a prisoner, that he smashed the fingers of another prisoner with the handle of a mammoty (a type of heavy hoe). The prisoners who were tortured at the Ampara CSU said that Policemen poured boiling water down their throat [sic] as a consequence of which one them [sic] is unable to speak.

These two paragraphs were followed by the full text of the Human Rights Commission report, an even more raw and upsetting document in which prisoners graphically detailed their tortures. Now there are several things we should note about this Internet article. First, of course, is the grave horror of its subject matter and the perilous political context of its appearance. Although Sri Lanka has experienced a change of government and a "permanent" cease-fire that has held since Febuary 2002, at the time the above article was written, in July 2001, it was entering its 18th year of civil war. This was, or had been, a conflict in which Sri Lankan Tamil separatists were fighting a ruthless, bloody war against a selectively repressive central government that was, for the most part, aligned with and only responsive to Sri Lanka's Sinhalese-speaking, Buddhist majority. Since the mid 1980s, Sri Lankan Tamil nationalist hopes have been embodied, therefore, politically, by a sanguinary

nationalist guerilla army, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (or LTTE), whose singular goal, desperately held to, has been the carving of a Tamil state, an Eelam, out of the island nation's northern and eastern provinces. And although it would have been hard to guess in July 2001 given the coverage of the conventional world media, both sides in this conflict were conducting it with ruthless inhumanity. Their dismal records, by that summer, had come to include years of unprovoked attacks on civilians, tortures, disappearances, bombings, the forced recruitment of children, the killing of journalists, and massacres.[12] Against this sad backdrop, then, the tortures described above, however horrific, were hardly surprising.

But by the summer of 2001 a new element had been added. The Sri Lankan United Front (UF) government of President Kumaratunga, initially elected in 1995 on a peace and civil rights platform, which had long been trying to please the United State's Clinton administration—and thus pluck for themselves and their expensive war effort some of the fruits of the global economy—had recently stepped up its public relations campaign by claiming to have truly ended torture as a conventional police and military tactic. But 2001 was a difficult time to be making such a claim. The past year had confronted the government with a string of stinging military defeats, and, consequently, a rising tide of political instability and public ennui amongst its core Sinhalese supporters—civic tremors that would grow more intense, and eventually topple its parliamentary majority the following year. Hence, at the time, reports about routinized torture such as the ones all too often reported by Tamilnet.com were being either curtly denied (when this was possible), or else swiftly and brutally repressed. Sri Lankan newspapers, for example, were forbidden by law to carry such news, and often sported large areas of blacked-out text as a consequence.

Tamilnet.com, however, being an Internet site whose web masters resided offshore—more of this later—escaped such strictures. So, in their case, more brutal means were tried. One of its reporters, Mylvaganam Nimalarajan, was killed in October 2000 by a grenade tossed through his study window.[13] And the editor of Tamilnet.com, one Mr. Dharmeratnam,[14] who would later be brutally beaten during the fall 2001 election campaign, was called a traitor on government-controlled television in June. As if this were not enough, an article in a government newspaper later speculated, "innocently," that extra-legal Sinhalese nationalist "extremists" might be provoked by this charge into assassinating him (as well as some other wayward editors), a thinly veiled threat given that it was generally held at the time that such militias were really gov-

ernment controlled. So Mr. Dharmeratnam, of Tamilnet.com, took to sleeping in different houses every night, and varying his routes through Sri Lanka's capital, Colombo, during the day. Eventually, in early July, a business trip he had been planning to take to North America and Europe (to meet Tamilnet.com supporters and translators and an anthropologist—me), took him out of the country until August.

Now it is important to note, here, that while Tamilnet.com was being attacked and threatened, no real effort was being made to refute its charges. And this lack of refutation is a consequence of the second thing we must note about the article cited above: its professionalism and marketability. With the exception of the two typos at the bottom of the second paragraph—which I shall explain shortly—the article reads like a conventional piece of reportage, which it is, albeit on an exotic (to most readers in English) and certainly horrible topic. Notice the conventional "who-what-when-where" structure of the article; the absence of political rhetoric; the conditional factuality with which it asserts that the police "allegedly subjected" rather than certainly did the tortures it describes. Note also the careful sourcing of the article. This could be a report in any of the better Sri Lankan dailies. Moreover, it could just as well be a short article in the *Manchester Guardian*, or in *USA Today*, except that *USA Today* would be unlikely to run such a story unless its victims were American. Reports like it, though different in subtle ways we must discuss shortly, appear all the time on the wire services: A.P., Reuters, and BBC. And, indeed, sometimes these wire services cite or quote Tamilnet.com's reports verbatim. They can do so because Tamilnet.com's articles are written in the same neutral, authoritative tone as the commercial Western press; because its facts and figures, double-sourced and carefully checked, are reliable; and because Tamilnet.com articles may be reproduced without charge, as long as there is attribution. As V.S. Sambandan, Sri Lanka Special Correspondent for *The Hindu*, a well-respected Indian national daily, told me, "Tamilnet.com's reports are 99.9% credible." This makes Tamilnet.com's news very difficult to ignore since charges that it is an LTTE "mouthpiece", though often made by the Sinhala-dominated Colombo press (most Western news agencies more carefully describe Tamilnet.com as "pro-rebel"), are so at odds with both the style of its presentations, always flat and neutral, and the accuracy of its reporting, which, so far as I know, has rarely been successfully challenged, that such charges ring hollow.[15] Considered as a product, then, Tamilnet.com's articles are always ready for 'sale' should anyone want to 'buy' them, for they are perfectly packaged in the market-popular language of contemporary

Western journalism. This was why Tamilnet.com's professionalism, here, was (and remains) both its passport to a wider, non-Tamil readership, and its protection against mere refutation.

The two typos at the bottom of the article's second paragraph, however, require a different kind of explication. For they are, indeed, products of the very concrete, postmodern circumstances in which Mr. Dharmeratnam was translating and editing this article; and, what is more, they were somewhat my fault. You see, in the first week of July 1, 2001, I was staying with Mr. Dharmeratnam—himself only recently arrived from Sri Lanka for a short visit—at the pleasant, suburban house of a Tamil refugee family in Toronto, Canada. Canadian citizens now, this family lived in a small, neat, two-story, white frame house off of one of Mississauga's main drives. They had put my traveling companion, Mr. Dharmeratnam, up for the night in the upstairs bedroom which normally belonged to their oldest child—a twelve-year- old boy with, if his walls were anything to judge by, an obsession with Star Wars. The room was a pleasant rumble, a boy's paradise strewn throughout with the flotsam and jetsam of 21st century Canadian life. And its centerpiece was a huge, white computer with, I was told, enough memory to shame any IBM mainframe of ten years earlier.

On the day I am recollecting, their uncle Dharmeratnam was sitting in his sarong, bleary-eyed from a week's hard traveling, trying to edit Tamilnet.com's features for the next day. That is, more specifically, he was accessing and translating into English a news story written in Tamil hours before by a reporter in Sri Lanka while fending off the mischievous comments of an offending horde of nieces and nephews, six in all, who had invaded the room moments before. The story he was translating and editing amidst all the youthful uproar was, of course, the horrible story cited above. Apparently, some member of the Sri Lankan government's Human Rights Commission, frustrated that the government had suppressed another one of its reports, had leaked the text of this one to one of Tamilnet.com's correspondents. I was there when Mr. Dharmeratnam got the e-mail because I have known him for twenty years, and have been, for the last five years, his biographer—this being my ethnographic role of late. On this occasion I was also acting as a convenient foil for the children's slyly insulting comments about their uncle's and my expanding girths. As I stood there, at his left shoulder, I saw him write: "The prisoners who were tortured at the Ampara CSU said that Policemen poured boiling water down their throat as a consequence of which one them is unable to speak." Not yet registering the content, I almost said, "'throat' needs an 's' and you dropped an "of"", but was

held back, at first, by embarrassment— for Mr. Dharmeratnam, a columnist for fifteen years, and ever the editor, generally corrects my typos. And then, suddenly, a mental image of the torture itself rose up in my mind and took my comments away. While I paused, somewhat lost in thought, the children started singing an annoying TV song.

"These children," Mr. Dharmeratnam fussed, as the hub-bub increased to a crescendo, "are going to kill me." One child, a nephew about six, encouraged by this, edged around his shoulder, leaned possessively into his other side, and stared intently at the screen of Tamil text his uncle S was translating. The little boy turned to me and said, proudly, pointing to an eleven-year-old sister, "She speaks Tamil!"

"Be quiet, *Tompi!*[16] She hissed.

"Do you?," I asked, gently.

"Just a little. I can write my name. But *Appa*...", she stopped, bit her lip.

"Yes?"

"*Appa* told me you speak Tamil."

"Mangles Tamil," said their Uncle, without looking up from his screen.

"Precisely," I said.

"Pizza!" their mother yelled from down below, and there was a noisy exodus.

Mr. Dharmeratnam leaned back and rubbed his eyes. "I read this stuff and I almost want to laugh. What is it with this constable and the vomit and the piss? Not that it's right to laugh. Those poor, poor fellows. Horrible. Horrible. And it might be me, soon enough." He got up and retied his sarong. And then he, too, was lost in thought for a time. Finally, he shook his head.

"Well, young fellow, I've seen enough of this for today. Go away. It's time for a nap."

I remember thinking, as I went back to my own room to write up my notes and prepare for the interviews I would be doing that day, how very domestic were the circumstances of Tamilnet.com's production—and how much Tamil people in the diaspora depended on it. All the Tamil adults that I interviewed that summer in Toronto and London (twenty-five in all) reported that they checked Tamilnet.com (among other websites) for news several times a week. This was particularly important for them because, by this time, many had been out of the country since the late 1980s, when the first great wave of refugees fled the war. Hence, for many Tamil refugees, Sri Lanka was experienced mainly as a kind of distant echo heard through the dimming filter of various, unreliable, interlocutors. And this was especially so for the young,

and for the children of this first wave of refugees, for whom English (or German or French) had now become, really, their primary language.

Judging from my interviews, and from comments other Tamil refugees have made to me for years, this seems to have left diasporic Tamils in the 1980s and early 1990s with some unreliable alternatives when it came to obtaining news about Sri Lanka. Thus there was, on the one hand, what they perceived as a disinterested and sometimes hostile Western press. "The press here", one Canadian-Tamil man told me, "is useless. They say nothing or they say rubbish about Sri Lanka." And from my analytic point of view, of course, this was to be expected, since the Western media, as a market-popular industry, could hardly afford to focus its gaze on affairs of interest to so small a minority of people—or, when it did occasionally see them, deal with those affairs in any way that might offend the strategic interests of their owners or the prejudices of their market. So diasporic Tamils, by and large, felt they were wise to discount the Western press. But this left them, for a source of news, only the over-politicized rhetoric of the diasporic press. I mean, that is, the highly politicized newspapers, radio stations, and, eventually, websites, run in Canada, England, France and so forth by ardent Tamil nationalists, mostly in Tamil, many directly or (not very) indirectly under the control of the LTTE. While most of the people I talked to were sympathetic to the nationalist rhetoric of the diasporic press, they seemed to rarely count its effusions as news. This too was hardly surprising, of course, since, as identity-resistance popular media, the primary "job" of the diasporic press was not to convey news but to legitimize Tamil claims to national status. And, again, most Tamil people I talked to were wise enough to read the diasporic media that way, and so, while remaining loyal readers and viewers, looked elsewhere for actual news.

So instead, people told me, before the Internet, they tended to obtain most of their news about home over the phone from relatives, or through videos of family events sent through the mail, or through the traveler's tales of those fortunate enough to be able to return home for visits: in other words, through rumor. What they did not have, as a consequence, was access to accurate, daily news about what was going on in Sri Lanka, particularly in its war-torn hinterland—until, that is, the advent of Tamilnet.com. It is appropriate, therefore, that we turn now to the tale of Tamilnet.com's origin—a story that must begin with its editor and creator, Mr. Dharmeratnam, and the unique circumstances that gave rise to his stewardship.

The Making of Tamilnet.com

As I've already said, I have known Mr. Dharmeratnam for over twenty years now. I first met Mr. Dharmeratnam back in 1981, when I first went to Sri Lanka to do my Ph.D. fieldwork in a small, Hindu village called Mandur. We were both very young and, alas, much thinner then. He lived in Batticaloa, the capital town of the Batticaloa district, and I used to see him periodically when I rode the thirty miles to town on my motor bike to visit its pink stucco library or the old stone Dutch fort which housed the District's government offices. We were drawn together out of a mutual love of philosophy, or, at the very least, of philosophizing, and so, when I would come, we would sit for hours on the crumbling concrete pad of his family's former veranda—its red tile roof having been blown away in a 1978 cyclone—or in the ruins of his father's library, smoking cigarettes, eating his mother's wonderful food, and debating. Mr. Dharmeratnam belonged to a prominent, provincial family that once had been very rich and powerful in the District. At one time, up until the early 1970s, Mr. Dharmeratnam's family had owned coconut plantations and thousands of acres of paddy land. His father had been to Cambridge, and had attended lectures by Bertram Russell. His grandfathers and great-grandfathers, on both his mother's and father's sides, had been important merchants and landholders, and his paternal grandfather had been among the first Sri Lankan elected members of the State Council under the old British, colonial regime back in the 1930s. But land reform, his father's death, their own internal familial politics, and, eventually the tensions that would soon lead Sri Lanka to war, had dispelled the fortune and dispersed all but a remnant of the family about the globe to places as far-away as England, Fiji, and Australia. Mr. Dharmeratnam, his sister, his late mother, several of her sisters, and a number of cousins, nephews, and stepsiblings were all that were left in Batticaloa. His own brothers were in England.

Mr. Dharmeratnam had been a student when I first met him in 1981, just then entering his first year as an undergraduate at Peradeniya University, Sri Lanka's most selective campus, but the war changed all that. An ardent though philosophically nuanced nationalist, Mr. Dharmeratnam, like so many other young Tamils, left school and joined a nationalist group—in his case, the People's Liberation Organization of Tamil *Eelam*, or PLOTE, one of the many armed Tamil nationalist groups that sprang up at the time. The anti-Tamil rioting of 1983, and the subsequent civil war, carried him into the thick of the fighting and politics of the conflict until the late 1980s, when, after the India-Lanka accord of 1987, he retired from PLOTE (by that time a "legal" political party), made his way, malarial and rupeeless, to Colombo, Sri Lanka's

capital, and began a career as a journalist. His "Taraki" column, which began to appear in English in *The Island*, one of Sri Lanka's few independent English newspapers, quickly became famous for its clear, dispassionate, reporting on the military tactics and strategies of all sides in the war. A war, by the way, which had grown ridiculously complex by 1990, involving, as it did, the Indian army fighting the LTTE, the Sri Lankan government army fighting a Sinhalese ultra-nationalist group called the JVP (*Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna* or People's Liberation Front), and then, after 1992, the Sri Lankan army fighting the LTTE again. As "Taraki" Mr. Dharmeratnam became particularly well known, however, to diasporic Tamils. Indeed, a book of his writings, entitled *The Eluding Peace: An Insider's Political Analysis of the Ethnic Conflict in Sri Lanka*, was collected and published by his fans in Paris in 1991.

This was why, in 1996, Mr. Dharmeratnam was asked to come to North America to meet a group of his readers in the Tamil diaspora who were interested in reforming their already established website. They were a far-flung group that included a computer-programmer from Norway—a technical wizard named K. Jayachandran[17]—a systems analyst from London, and several "dotcom" entrepreneurs in the United States, all linked by e-mail and discount long-distance phone rates. In 1995, inspired by a common nationalism, and distrustful of the Western news media, it was this group that started Tamilnet.com. Their ambition was to create a website that could counter Western press coverage of Sri Lanka that was, in their opinion, both slighting and hostile. The site they subsequently put together was well financed, professionally constructed, and all in all, looked very good. But it received few hits and, soon, some of the more pragmatic U.S. Tamils were talking about pulling the plug. Instead they decided to call on "Taraki," a professional they all admired. Hence his presence, in August 1996, in an American suburb, seated at a gleaming, Pier One white-pine kitchen table, confronting the admiration, the good will, but, above all, the puzzlement of his hosts. Why, they asked him, had their state-of-the-art, beautifully designed site failed? And could he, possibly, take the site over and somehow make it a success? He hesitated before answering. For the whole proposition, he later told me, took some careful thought.

News as Simulacra
Of course, he could already see why the site, as it was then, had failed. As he later told me in an e-mail:

> The operation...got nowhere because they had no ground information and, being nationalists and being circumscribed by a world of opaque expatriate Tamil nationalists, could not present the Tamilnet as a professional 'neutral' wire service. Anyway, it was stagnating and was on the verge of closing up.

He immediately had a good notion how to fix the first problem, the lack of "ground information". He know there was already in place, sprinkled throughout the Sri Lankan hinterland, a loose network of part-time, Tamil reporters, often teachers or government clerks, who phoned in stories or basic facts to the big Sri Lankan newspapers and Western wire services in Colombo, Sri Lanka's capital, and sometimes even sent in photos. But they were, as a rule, untrained (as journalists) and, because badly paid, barely motivated, and largely ignored. Why? It was, he claimed, because the Colombo-based, government-sanctioned press, both Sinhalese and English, did not really want more accurate information coming in from a countryside where the war was going more and more badly. As for the international press, they stayed focused on the capital, Colombo. "The back waters of the north and east, particularly the east coast [Mr. Dharmeratnam's own home] and the Wanni [the northern, dry zone jungles, home base of the LTTE]," said Mr. Dharmeratnam, "were as outlandish to them as Timbuktu." Those hinterland reporters that wrote or called in to the Tamil press in Colombo, of course, did get heard by them. But that was, as Mr. Dharmeratnam put it, "preaching to the converted". Moreover, even the in-country Tamil language newspapers still tended to focus on Jaffna at the expense of the hinterlands, especially the eastern hinterlands. "End result," he said, "the voiceless remained voiceless." But Mr. Dharmeratnam figured that he could change all this with new training and equipment. As he explained to the Tamil group later, in a subsequent meeting in London, by supplying these reporters with better pay, some training in how to write their own stories, and, most importantly, computers with modems and digital cameras, he could create a news-generating network that would give Tamilnet.com no end of "ground"—and "ground," more importantly, that would be focused on what all the other media were ignoring: the provincial villages where the war was being fought and suffered. His notion was that the reporters could write their stories in Tamil, e-mail the results to bilingual editors and translators in the United States, Europe, Colombo, and, sometimes Australia, whereupon the newly minted pieces, in both Tamil and English, could be uploaded to the site. In this way Tamilnet.com, while remaining very

locally based, could avoid both the Colombo focus of the press, and (equally important at the time) the Sri Lankan government's censorship. And, indeed, all this Mr. Dharmeratnam put into place as soon as he eventually agreed to take over the site.

As he described it to me later:

> We got the service of a Tamil woman in Britain for editing copy. [Although, of course, she was just one of many editors from all over Europe, North America, and Europe.] Her editing was mobile—she worked on a Nokia 9000. [....]Let's assume she was having coffee in Covent Garden around 6 P.M. London time. A bomb goes off in Trincomalee [an east coast town] killing a couple of soldiers around 12:30 P.M. Sri Lanka time. The Trinco correspondent sends off the story. Our email system then broadcasts it to all the editors. Let's say it takes about 29 minutes and 58 seconds for the Trinco man to check the story, write it, and send it. Then the [woman] at Covent Garden gets an email alert on her Nokia at 6 P.M.[....]Then she opens her Nokia, edits the story and sends it off to the uploading place, which is in a non-English speaking European country. The sun rises in Sri Lanka five hours before London. Whereas Reuters or AP would first get the same story to Colombo, and then give it the neces- sary slant and send it to Hong Kong for editing and uploading. The point being that Reuters and AP would invariably ignore the fact that so many Tamil civilians living near the scene of the explosion have been (hypothet- ically) beaten up or killed in reprisal.

But the logistics were the easy part of the problem of Tamilnet.com. The larg- er difficulty was the "opaque expatriate" nationalism that Mr. Dharmeratnam saw surrounding the old site. And this led into deeper waters indeed. For this problem, as Mr. Dharmeratnam later hashed it out for me in various conversa- tions, was really two problems: the problem of nationalist discourse; and the problem of those international, market-based, languages of journalism and academia that either preempted, hid, or ignored Tamil concerns and, there- fore, would tend to prevent any Tamil-led endeavor from reaching a wider, non-Tamil audience.

Now with regard to the expatriate media, Mr. Dharmeratnam felt he was right in believing that a specific discourse of nationalism had become *de rigueur* for most diasporic Tamil sites, newspapers, or magazines. Although his whole career had been spent in Sri Lanka, and he continued living there

throughout the war, he had family both in London and Toronto; and, as "Taraki," had been invited numerous times to speak to diasporic communities and worried governments all over the world. He had, thus, an ample opportunity to see the expatriate media in action. He realized, therefore, that the currents of its nationalist rhetoric tended to drift anything captured by it down well-carved washes toward absorption into a sea of similarly directed, Tamil diasporic, sentiments. There everything whether similar or distinctive, tended to be dissolved into a general, pro-Eelam, effusion; and this teardrop in a wave aspect of their activities both exposed the reasons for Tamilnet's earlier failure and its future, puzzling challenge. For if being a mere echo of a larger nationalist roar explained the site not being heard, it remained hard to imagine how to speak without that roar. After all, those involved remained, themselves, nationalists. They wanted—as Mr. Dharmeratnam wanted—a nationalist site; but one, paradoxically, that would be also effective in speaking to non-Tamils, to non-nationalists, and, indeed, to people who cared not a bit for Sri Lankan Tamils one way or the other. But how? The only way, reasoned Mr. Dharmeratnam, was to give up the rhetoric of "opaque expatriate" nationalism altogether and figure out another way of achieve their ends. And this other way would necessarily require making, as he put it, "ironic use" of the language of "objective neutrality" most often deployed by Sri Lanka's foremost interlocutors: the international press and Western academia.[18]

This kind of irony is something Mr. Dharmeratnam and I have spent many years talking about. As I said, twenty years ago when I was first getting to know Mr. Dharmeratnam, we used to sit up all night sometimes talking philosophy in the ruins of his dead father's house by the Batticaloa lagoon. An autodidact, Mr. Dharmeratnam had been not only well-versed in the Tamil classics, but also in Western philosophy —for his father, before he died, had bought the whole Chicago "Great Books" series, and Mr. Dharmeratnam had made his way through all of them. He had also, by this time, read a lot of French poststructuralists, obtaining their writings mostly in translation via photocopies passed around among a group of Batticaloa district intellectuals, called the Batticaloa Reader's Circle, that he had helped found when he was 19. So even then he had been able to identify what was for him a central flaw of much Western-style anthropological writing about Sri Lanka, a subject about which he enjoyed making me squirm. Its problem, he used to claim, is that even when scholarly writing about Sri Lanka is well done, and done by dedicated Sri Lankan anthropologists rather than by globe-trotting Westerners like myself (come to earn lucrative degrees), its intellectual products,

nonetheless, are designed for an academic market whose political and mental center of gravity lies outside of a Sri Lankan's (or a Sri Lankan Tamil's) moral orbit. A market, what is more, that, in his opinion, prizes the manufacture of theoretical uniqueness much more than the assuaging of Sri Lanka's various grim realities.

As I have said, Mr. Dharmeratnam's own attempts to address those grim realities over the last 20 years have included a long stint in the 1980s as a nationalist guerrilla, and an even longer stand as a well-known journalist. Yet even so he had always maintained to me that he was, really, neither a conventional nationalist nor a journalist so much as an "ironist" using those forms of life, nationalism and journalism, for his own strategic purposes. Now by "ironist" Mr. Dharmeratnam meant one who accepts the necessity of acting within those historically situated language games that actually exist. And he always contrasted such an actor with people, such as academics, who are tempted into what he always called the "Empedoclean folly" of either waxing on, metadiscursively, about (or, rather, "above") such language games, as he believed academics did, or of trying to reinvent them into some more congenial form—the besetting sin, as he saw it, of comfortable, liberal, Western romantics like myself. That is, he believed that while it was true that discourses such as nationalism, journalism, or Western-style academia have, as it were, strong dispositional vectors that cannot be ignored or completely denied, he also saw that there was as well a kind of "windage" to them—like that rush of air that follows a jet's landing. And this meant that one could, he claimed, use them strategically to achieve secondary goals so long as, in doing so, the primary impetuses of these discourses were not denied. And this is just how Mr. Dharmeratnam, with varying success, had been trying to use nationalism, journalism, and, occasionally (in his writing and in his relationship with me) anthropology for twenty years. Hence, it was no surprise to me that this, too, was how he proposed to solve Tamilnet.com's invisibility problem.

Solve it, that is, by first buying into what one might call, to use Baudrillard's dour jargon of infinite consumerism, those simulations of Sri Lanka that are produced by the seemingly "objective neutral" hyperreality of the (market-popular) Western press and academia. But then carefully subverting the resulting simulacra (of "Tamil terrorists," "Peace talks," and "ethnic conflict") by redirecting them, as it were, according to the goals of a different, Tamil-focused, marketing campaign. The key here, though, lay in assuming that "objective neutral" tone. What this meant in practice was that village-based Tamil reporters were to be trained in the techniques of conventional

Western reporting. All factual assertions were to be triple-checked and double-sourced, all interviews (if possible) recorded, and all nationalist rhetoric was to be removed from the site. There would no longer be funny numbers, patriotic poems, pictures of martyred LTTE fighters, or invocations of *Eelam*, the hoped-for Tamil state. Instead, the tone would be the flat, unemotional, supremely confident, "Just-the-facts-Ma'am", monotone of international journalism and of much social science. (It is an irony that I have not discussed with Mr. Dharmeratnam that in the wake of 9/11 much of the press in the United States has abandoned this tone in favor of a hot, partisan, shreiking.[19]) Moreover, this change of tone could not be done just for show. For Tamilnet.com's reports could not afford to merely mimic Western journalism; they had to be, rather, exemplars of Western journalism—better, that is, in terms of accuracy and remorseless even-handedness, than AP, Reuters, or even the BBC. They would do, hence, what these Western news services did better than the news services themselves could, but do it with a subtle difference in both gaze and goal. And that subtle difference was what would allow Tamilnet.com to serve, at once, both the market and Tamil people.

Or so Mr. Dharmeratnam strenuously argued. And eventually, after a good deal of tussle and worry, it was so agreed. Shortly thereafter the site was shut down completely. When reopened later in 1997 it was along exactly the lines Mr. Dharmeratnam had laid down. Soon conventional stories about LTTE bombings, big LTTE-Sri Lankan army battles, and Sri Lankan government pronouncements and debates, all carefully written with dead-pan journalistic neutrality, and designed to cater to Western interests, were appearing cheek by jowl with other stories, similarly packaged, but illustrating the more quotidian effects of the struggle on noncombatant Tamil people in Sri Lanka's farthest hinterlands. Consider, for example, the following stories which appeared on April 29th, 1997, during the battle for the Sri Lankan army's military base at Pallai.

SCHOOL SHIFTED DUE TO NAVY BOMBARDING

The Government Tamil Mixed School (GTMS) in Ilankanthai has been shifted to a safer location in the interior for fear of further attacks by Sri Lanka Naval gunboats Department of Education officials in Mutur said today. The classes for the children were conducted under trees following the SLN attack yesterday, as there are no buildings in the interior for running the school they said.

And:

SLN SHELLS VILLAGE, TWO KILLED
Two civilians were killed and another wounded yesterday morning when the Sri Lanka Navy (SLN) gunboats shelled Ilakkanthai, a fishing hamlet in the Mutur area, about 15 km. south of Trincomalee.

This kind of self-explanatory counter-posing of government and LTTE actions with documented local consequences was precisely the effect Tamilnet.com was designed to accomplish. It was so novel that within a year of its rebirth in 1997, Tamilnet.com was receiving 3 million hits a month. In a small way, this was voice indeed.[20]

Conclusions

Is Tamilnet.com an example of popular anthropology on the Internet? I think it is, or it is insofar as we mean by "anthropology" the kind of ethnography that cultural anthropologists in the United States tend to write. Moreover, I think Tamilnet.com exemplifies why the Internet is uniquely suited for doing a particular kind of popular anthropology that may, eventually, supplement and (who knows?) perhaps replace much (though not all) conventional cultural anthropology. But to see all this we need to back up and review what this case reveals given my introductory discussion of anthropology, popularity, and the Internet.

First, Tamilnet.com constitutes a pretty clear case of autoethnography in Mary Louise Pratt's sense of that term. That is, Tamilnet.com's "ironic" use of journalistic practice is indeed a systematic attempt by members of a disempowered Tamil population to represent themselves and their people to a hegemonic "other"—in this case the "globalizing" world-at-large as that community is being "imagined" by journalism—in terms that the hegemon can accept. This interlocutory, representative role, of course, is precisely the one that academic anthropology used to play in colonial times. One thinks, here, of Margaret Mead in *Redbook* using Samoan sexuality to explain American teenagers to their mothers—and thereby, as I think she also hoped, tempting suburban Americans into reimagining themselves as somehow not so different from such "exotic" people. But in Tamilnet.com's case the motivation to explain is indigenously strategic (in that it is serving a form of Tamil "populist" nationalism) and, thus, in our terms, inherently identity-resistance popular.

This is one sense, then, in which Tamilnet.com, as autoethnography, constitutes an example of popular anthropology.

But there is more to Tamilnet.com's popularity than this. Remember that in this instance we are dealing with a tangled skein of different kinds of popularity all bound up together. Thus, 1) we have the market popularity of the Internet (both as a site and as a set of languages to operate there); 2) we have the identity-resistance popularity of the Internet as a site that almost anyone can enter, and where anyone's expressions (given the common mark-up language, html) can be of the same quality as anyone else's; 3) we have the market-popular discourses of journalism and academia; 4) and, finally, we have the identity-resistance popular discourse of Tamil nationalism. What Mr. Dharmeratnam in his design of Tamilnet.com quite consciously did was use this tangle of different popularities for his, and his group's, own identity-resistance popular ends. That is, to be explicit, Tamilnet.com was set up to use the identity-resistance popular accessibility of the Internet, and the market-popular language and design of the World Wide Web, to express identity-resistance popular Tamil concerns in a market-popular journalistic discourse that renders those concerns acceptable to the hegemonic world community (as that is imagined by the press). In other words, Tamilnet.com, as "ironically" designed by its creators, uses different forms of popularity to subvert and support each other. Nor is Tamilnet.com's activity here unique. The Internet now hosts many autoethnographic sites that seemed to have been designed to take advantage of just this muddle of popularities.[21] This kind of strategically constructed, unacknowledged, dependence of one cultural practice on another, mutually incommensurable, practice is what I have called, elsewhere, "amiable incoherence" (Whitaker 1999). Whatever one calls it, however, Tamilnet.com's doings (like the doings of other, similar sites) are certainly 'popular' in a complex way that we must admit, I think, given its self-explanatory strategic purpose, and precisely because of its internally 'incoherent' popular aspects, constitutes a form of popular anthropology. Moreover, it is a form of popular anthropology that easily surpasses most conventional anthropology in reach and effectiveness. Even Margaret Mead in Redbook rarely reached three million readers a month.

And how does all this relate to my larger interest in the perseverance of nationalist projects? As Mr. Dharmeratnam likes to argue, stateless actors seeking to create states for themselves within already existing nation-states that are hostile to the idea obviously face (among others things) two tough challenges. First, of course, is the threat to them posed by an already existing

state's monopoly of force. This threat has been met, in the Sri Lankan Tamils' case, by the excessively violent LTTE, which has grown over 20 years from an unconventional "low intensity" guerilla group using hit and run 'terrorist' tactics into a conventional army capable of fighting the Sri Lankan army on its own terms. This is likely why the LTTE, a genuinely frightening group with a violent intolerance for any kind of dissent, remains yet very popular among Sri Lankan Tamils; many continue to feel its guns are what stand between them and a potentially revengeful Sri Lankan state. Many also feel—and not just Tamil Sri Lankans (Uyangoda 2004:8)—that its guns are also the main reason the Sri Lankan state is willing to negotiate: a suspicion confirmed, it seems, in May 2004 by the willingness of the newly elected, UPFA (United People's Freedom Alliance) minority government to negotiate with the LTTE despite much pre-election rhetoric to the contrary. But a second challenge to non-state actors, as important as a state's monopoly of force, are the hegemonic and sometimes direct control states generally exert over the media. This media control comes in two forms: within a state's borders via the various forms of direct control a majoritarian state can impose through legislation (i.e., censorship, state ownership newspapers, etc.) or through sheer numerical control of the local market; and beyond its borders by means of the indirect control (as the "official voice") a state has over how its activities are generally portrayed internationally. The problem, here, for non-state actors is to somehow circumvent this media near-monopoly by creating both an alternative "local media" and an alternative "official voice." Yet this is not so easy. Simply creating an alternative "public sphere," which in one sense is what aspiring nationalisms do, and then trying to flood the state or the world with its contrary identity-resistance popularity via "community" owned newspapers and radio stations would not do. Nationalist discourse of this sort is generally quite opaque to outsiders, and when issuing from an "illegitimate" (i.e., non-state) source, will be oft times dismissed or derided. And, of course, often a little direct oppression can suppress it, at least for a while. So what to do? What Tamilnet.com did when confronted by this problem is really quite interesting: it hooked its train to a completely alternative engine—the market popularity of global capitalism. By doing this, Tamilnet.com's nationalists were using the transnational power and authority of global, market-based journalism to *transcend* the local media monopoly wielded by the Sri Lankan state. They simply ascended to a quite different level of political play. By means of this levitation, Tamilnet.com was able to use the different rules and forces of globalization—famously corrosive of national sovereignty in the lit-

erature on global flows—against one nation state in order to further their dream of creating another nation state. Now my suspicion is that something like this kind of strategic sleight of hand is often found in nationalist projects that face the same kind of media near-monopoly. Indeed, a good example of just this was provided by the skillful manipulation of market-based journalism by the EZLN in Chiapas, a case that actually preceeded and somewhat inspired the actions of Tamilnet's creators. But, in Tamilnet.com's case, to what extent has this tactic succeeded?

At present, in May 2004, all of Sri Lanka's national newspapers, regardless of language (Sinhala, Tamil, and English), as well as all of the main Western and Indian news agencies reporting on Sri Lanka, use Tamilnet.com reports— despite frequent editorial condemnation of the site. But success is best signaled, I suppose, by opposition. In the eight years that Tamilnet.com has run, both the LTTE and the Sri Lankan government have expressed, at times, extreme displeasure with its reporting. But while the LTTE, recognizing the underlying nationalism of the site, has simply grumbled, the Sri Lankan government, before the cease-fire, twice threatened Tamilnet.com's reporters and editors (those within reach in Sri Lanka) with arrest for "treason," and once hinted, as I said earlier, that "uncontrolled" Sinhalese extremists might be inspired to perform some extra-judicial killing. Twice these government threats had to be turned back by using Western journalists, such as Peter Arnette, and anthropologists (such as myself) to obtain for Tamilnet.com's people the protection of human rights NGOs and international publicity. And perhaps this strategic consumption of anthropology (and journalism) suggests a new, "ironic," role for our tired, old, "unpopular" discipline to play. However that turns out, one thing is clear: nothing will remain the same for anthropology now that communities have gone online.

ENDNOTES

[2]In a slightly later essay Pratt defines an autoethnographic text as one "in which people undertake to describe themselves in ways that engage with representations others have

made of them. Thus if ethnographic texts are those in which European metropolitan subjects represent to themselves their others (usually their conquered others), autoethnographic texts are representations that the so defined others construct in response to or in dialogue with those texts" (1996:531). That Tamilnet.com is an example of autoethnography is, then, obvious. What remains to be worked out is how Tamilnet.com is also an example of strategically manipulated popularity and, therefore, a special form of popular anthropology.

[3]Of course, Arnold Schwartzenegger's case is a bit more complex since he is, as it were, a product masquerading as a populist. Indeed, he is a perfect example of how American elites subvert an identity-resistance popular dialogic process into a market-popular monologue.

[4]For an excellent discussion of the concept of "popular culture" as that notion has been used in anthropology see Johannes Fabian's *Moments of Freedom: Anthropology and Popular Culture* (1998). Fabian does not make the distinction that I am looking for here between market and identity-resistance forms of popularity. His argument about the relationship between what he calls "popular culture" and culture in the traditional anthropological sense is very helpful, however, since it points to the cultural resistance and identity proclaiming aspects of popularity that interest me here. Fabian also nicely illustrates how the totalizing ambitions of traditional anthropological analysis so often used to cause such messy qualities as resistance and strategic identity management to be left out of ethnography.

[5]Or the other way around. Walter Benjamin, in the *Illuminations* (1968), makes the interesting argument that what lay at the root of fascism's triumph in Germany was the ability of fascists there to make its iconography and political language fun and, therefore, commercially viable. In our terms, then, Benjamin's argument would amount to saying that the Nazis won German popularity partly because they strategically confused identity-popularity with market-popularity to the advantage of the former. This is the opposite of what generally happens in capitalist societies where, as Baudrillard points out, identity is merely another product and, thus, a matter of simulation. Would it still be simulation, however, were people willing to die and kill for it? This is too tangled an issue to ponder here.

[6]I am thinking here of the philosophy of the later Wittgenstein as found in *Philosophical Investigations* (1958) and *On Certainty* (1969). Basically, as I have argued elsewhere (Whitaker 1996), Wittgenstein's latter philosophy rejected the possibility of an ultimate theory of meaning. He felt such theories "pathologically" hid just what they were supposed to be explaining: that is, meaning. So instead he tried, and I think succeeded, in demonstrating a remarkably ethnographic method of investigating how meanings work *as they occur* in human interaction. All this rejection of theory in favor of practice stemmed from Wittgenstein's belief—he would consider it an observation rather than a theory—that meanings are socially constituted within enacted forms of human interaction that he sometimes called "language games" and sometimes called "forms of life." Such "forms of life" had no universal quality, except that, *pace* his famous argument against the existence of private languages, they were always social. Hence: apologies, saying grace, giving a lecture, but also playing chess, doing particle physics, being a Catholic (or a garage mechanic, or an anthropologist) and engaging in politics at any level are also "forms of life." My point above is that Steve Feld's argument about "world music" being transformed when it is transferred from its original practical setting—whatever that was: funeral song, Tibetan prayer, "singing the forest"—to its new practical setting as a "product" on the world music market constitutes a shift in the sort of social interaction that will henceforth surround it, and hence in the 'rules' that will govern it as well. That is why it is not merely a shift in mode. For example, for 'world music' of any sort, once the shift is made, money henceforth regulates access, style dictates desirability, packaging encourages desire, and so forth. But I am arguing that such shifts are all that much more dramatic when they are from a market popular language game to an identity-resistance popular language game or vice versa. This latter point stems from Wittgenstein's observation that certain language games (and hence meanings) can share a "family resemblance"—that is, be united not because they share a single essential

feature but because they draw from a set of qualities, like a family of people do who do not all have the family nose, the family knee or the family ears, but who all have at least one of those attributes. I believe that "market popularity" and "identity-resistance popularity" are actually both sets of language games that are united under the terms I have given by family resemblance but distinct from each other in the ways I have outlined in this article.

[7]Competitors, of course, can and do make counter-claims in market-popular discourse. But there is, I would argue, an important difference between public arguments where the target of the argument, the audience, is not allowed to participate, as is the case with nearly all market-popular discourses, and public arguments where claimants are targeting each other as is the case, generally, in public arguments about identity or resistance. In the first instance, the target audience may have some limited impact on content through determining outcome—i.e., by buying or not buying. But market-popular audiences do not directly argue content; or, if they do—as, for example, when religious, political, or regional groups are offended by some product or ad—then something has gone badly "wrong" and the ad, item, or politician being marketed has become, as Madison avenue people say, an "issue"— by which they mean, I think, that the product has been recontextualized into a identity-resistance popular discourse. This, of course, is the kiss of death for market-popularity precisely because identity-resistance popularity presupposes conflict. And this explains, as Baudrillard noted, the ubiquity of hyperreality in commercially crafted worlds like Disneyland where, as he argues, every effort has been made to remove all contention. Hence, also, of course, a subtle resemblance between market-popularity and all forms of totalitarianism, including those forms of totalitarianism based on identity-resistance popularity. Though very different in form and, in Foucault's sense, discipline, both totalitarianism and market popularity aim to derail the very possibility of debate—totalitarianism by making it simply too dangerous to debate, and market popularity in two, rather more subtle ways. First, market popularity nixes debate by making its claims appear as either expressions of innate desire or intimate interest, rendering, therefore, all counter-claims as unnatural denials of self. How, after all, do you debate "Morning in America," Ronald Reagan's old Madison Avenue campaign slogan? Surely not by advocating twilight. Second, more brutally, market popularity derails debate by utilizing media that are, simply, too expensive for its audience to enter. Too expensive, that is, until the rise of the World Wide Web.

[8]I am well aware that the Internet was first created by the U.S. government; and that, in its original forms, it was decidedly noncommercial. This all changed in the 1990s. See Cassidy's interesting (2001:23-24) discussion of how in 1995 computer program director for the NSF, Stephen S. Wolff, convinced the government to shut down the noncommercial NSFNET (successor to ARPANET), and turn the system over to commercial contractors to run.

[9]There are countless internet cafes, for example, in Colombo, Sri Lanka. But how common are they elsewhere in the country? In the spring of 2004, Ram Alagon, a geographer from the University of Paredeniya, and I tried to gain some sense of this by mapping internet cafes on the predominantly Sinhala Colombo-Kandy road—a major thorough-fare—from Kegalle to Kandy, around half its length. We found five internet cafes, a few less than one per town, generally positioned near places where their owners had some hopes tourists would come, such as Pinnawala, famous for its Elephant Orphanage. We also interviewed the owners, who stated categorically that no one ever checked news sites (like Tamilnet) at their cafes because it was too expensive to do so given the slow transmissions lines available once one is more than 25 kilometers outside Colombo. Mostly, the owners claimed, people came in to check exam results. Tamilnet.com's creators, however, were well aware of this; they see their site as being aimed not at the Sri Lankan populace as a whole but three other targets: at Colombo elites (politicians, embassy people, army officers, etc.) who check the site every day, at Western scholars and journalists, and at the Tamil diaspora.

[10]Changes, of course, are happening. New suffixes such as .bus and .mus (for business and museums) are showing up. However, these changes do not limit access, and it remains hard

to see how the code could be modified to limit access without changing those aspects of the web that make it commercially viable.

[11]The National Peace Council of Sri Lanka estimates 65,000 people have been killed, at least half civilians. See Fuglerud 1999 and 2001 for the best overall description of the Tamil diaspora in Europe. See R. Cheran 2001 for an interesting description of Tamils in Toronto.

[12]See Amnesty International Annual Reports for Sri Lanka for the years 1997, 1998, 1999, 2000 and 2001. But one could select any five years from 1983 onward and find similar atrocities committed by both sides. However, in the late 1990s, as the LTTE became more like a conventional army, regular battlefield casualties began to rise precipitously.

[13]Actually, later reporting revealed that he was shot first, and then grenaded for good measure. Mylvaganam Nimalarajan, who also reported for the BBC, was probably killed by members of the Eelam People's Democratic Party (EPDP), a Tamil group aligned with the government. The history of all this is very complicated, but the upshot of it is that bloody in-fighting took place among Tamil separatist groups in the mid-eighties out of which the LTTE emerged victorious. The rump remains of the other separatist parties became "legal" political parties, and, until the 2001 elections, aligned themselves with the government against the LTTE. It is important to note here, however, that the LTTE has not been any easier on critical reporting, particularly within the Tamil community. A prime example was the LTTE's 1989 assassination of Dr. Rajani Thiranagama, one of the coauthers of *The Broken Palmyra* (1990), a book critical of the LTTE's own human rights abuses.

[14]Mr. Dharmeratnam is a relatively well-known public figure and wanted his real name used in publication.

[15]Are they, in fact, hollow? This is a complicated issue. On the one hand, none of the backers and editors of Tamilnet.com are members of the LTTE, and when one became an activist for the LTTE he was asked to leave his job as a sub-editor, and did. Nor does the LTTE have any kind of financial stake in Tamilnet.com. (Actually, the financial end of Tamilnet.com is pretty small: the site is produced for $2,000 a month.) On the other hand, all the people involved in Tamilnet.com are more or less passionate nationalists from the reporters up. And given the practical fact that the LTTE is the only Tamil group in Sri Lanka with enough military power to counter-balance the Sri Lankan military—hence the cease-fire and the possibility of negotiations—it tends to attract the support of most nationalists, Tamilnet.com included. Hence, as V.S. Sambandan, the Sri Lanka Special Correspondent for *The Hindu* pointed out to me, although Tamilnet.com does occasionally print stories that put the LTTE in a bad light—for example, they have carried *some* of Amnesty International's reports about the LTTE—they do not initiate such stories on their own. Moreover, during the recent crisis in which Karuna, the LTTE's eastern military commander challenged Prabhakaran, the 'leader', and split, briefly, from the LTTE, Tamilnet.com was largely denied access to Karuna's cadres (largely because Dharmeratnam gave a BBC interview hostile to Karuna) and subsequently had to report its stories using only northern sources. Still, the LTTE does not determine content or editorial policy at Tamilnet.com: Mr. Dharmeratnam and its other creators do. And while Mr. Dharmeratnam, for example, is a nationalist, his brand of nationalism is quite distinctly his own, as shown by his sometimes quite harsh criticisms of the views held by LTTE theoretician Anton Balasingham.

[16]*Tompi*= "little brother."

[17]Although I have studiously refrained, as a matter of general ethnographic practice, from gathering the names of most of those involved in Tamilnet.com, Mr. Jeyachandran, like Mr. Dharmeratnam, wished to be named. His Website design is a marvel and is a credit to his extraordinary talents. As important, perhaps, are the various ways he has been able to protect the site from the various methods used by outsiders to shut it down. Such cyber-attacks have been frequent since the site was created.

[18]It is very important that it be understood that the word "ironic" was Mr. Dharmeratnam's way of describing what he was doing, not mine. Mr. Dharmeratnam has a very elaborate theory about engaging in politics as a form of "ironic action"—a theory of which, for him, Tamilnet.com is a practical demonstration. But this is a theory he evolved (as his diaries from the late 1970s and early 1980s show) as a young man, long before the current fashion for using irony as an analytic figure arose in anthropology.

[19]See Zelizer and Allen 2002.

[20]By September 2000, there were many other important Tamil sites as well. One site, for example, Tamilnation.org, listed 44 other sites dealing with Tamil issues. (But this site was later closed down by grief when its owner's wife died.) Most of these sites were forums or chat rooms, but there were also a number of news sites, some sponsored by newspapers published in Sri Lanka, others, such as TamilCanadian.com, developed specifically for a particular diasporic Tamil community. What is important to note about these news sites, as they existed between 1997 and 2000, however, is that they all suffered from important limits to their ability to convey news. Those news sites that were simply slimmed-down e-versions of Sri Lankan newspapers (e.g., Dinakaran, Virakesari, Uthayan Daily, etc.) suffered from the problems already discussed above that beset the censored Sri Lankan press. The rest were clippings services with no reporters and, thus, no ability to collect information on their own. Only Tamilnet.com had its own network of reporters sending in stories daily from Sri Lanka.

[21]Perhaps the most famous example of this is provided by Chiapas Mexico's EZLN (Ejército Zapatista de Liberacion Nacional). Its use of the Internet during its violent reaction to NAFTA in 1994 is well-known; the EZLN's website (www.ezln.org) still receives over three million hits a month. (Interestingly, Mr. Dharmeratnam made a careful study of this website in 1997, and also looked at studies commissioned by the US department of defense through the Rand corporation on Information Warfare dealing with the EZLN cyber phenomenon among others, and which considered the prospect of non-state actors using the Internet to advance their causes.) But it is important to remember how recent is this kind of Internet politics. It is interesting, in this regard, to contrast the long, slow, sociologically complex struggle Aboriginal Australians waged from the 1970s to the early 1990s to make a space for themselves in Australia's white-dominated mass media (Ginsburg 1994) to the more recent, and fluid, situation for indigenous expression and protest outlined by the political activists Brecher, Costello, and Smith in their handbook, *Globalization from Below: The Power of Solidarity* (2000). There Brecher, *et al.* note that the monitoring of indigenous Internet sites by NGOs devoted to human rights has led to speedy responses by large numbers of Internet linked NGOs. The resulting "NGO swarm" can be very intimidating to targeted governments (83).

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