

## Netwar at New College

By Jay Taber

The afternoon of Friday the 13<sup>th</sup> of July 2007, I phoned my associate Mark Gould in Haight-Ashbury to see how he was doing with the Public Good Project domain transfer he was facilitating. In January 2007, Mark had joined the Public Good investigative research network as communications advisor for the Continuity Initiative, and had subsequently volunteered to reconstruct the Public Good website <http://www.publicgood.org/> .

At the time, Mark was still employed as the Internet portal developer for New College of California, a small private college headquartered in San Francisco's Mission District. We'd first met in 2002 when I was a graduate student there and submitted a couple essays for publication on the school's new website. Over the years, we stayed in touch as he created a media studies program for New College and I tried to market a communications curriculum I wrote as an appendix to my master's thesis on social change. In June 2007, I'd been appointed associate editor (North America) at Fourth World Journal.

When Mark answered the phone, he said he had the flu, and was a little behind schedule. Almost as an afterthought, he asked if I was aware of the letter sent recently from the Western Association of Schools and Colleges to the president of New College. When I answered that I hadn't followed things there in several years, he said he'd e-mail me a copy. Reading it over the weekend, I realized our alma mater was on the verge of being closed down. The scathing letter detailed horrendous abuses of power and misfeasance, concluding with what seemed a very real threat of losing accreditation. On Monday, I forwarded it to my former cohort and other alumni I thought might be concerned.

Tuesday July 17, I received a request for help in contextualizing the imminent conflict. The student who e-mailed me had read some of my July 16 comments on the San Francisco Bay Guardian weblog [http://www.sfbg.com/blogs/politics/2007/07/accreditation\\_report\\_blasts\\_ne.html](http://www.sfbg.com/blogs/politics/2007/07/accreditation_report_blasts_ne.html) , and was looking for advice for her and other current students at the school. Following a no-confidence vote in the college president by faculty and a demand for trustee resignations on July 18, college alumnus Holly Harwood ramped up her interactive website <http://stopsilence.net/> with otherwise unavailable documents and articles about the school she scanned and made available for download.

Reading Holly's weblog, I discovered just how tenuous the school's accreditation had been since its inception in 1971, and was taken aback by the horror stories <http://tbarj.wordpress.com/2007/08/12/imminent-collapse/> from twelve years earlier during the 1995 student insurrection covered at the time in the Bay Guardian print media. After peeling several hundred alumni e-mail addresses off the school's website, word started getting around.

On July 20, an ad hoc independent alumni association was formed, and online discussions started taking place on a listserv in addition to the local media weblogs. I

began writing daily posts <http://milieu.wordpress.com/2007/07/30/slow-motion-train-wreck/> on my various blogs, and soon people were phoning and e-mailing me their stories of mistreatment at the hands of callous administrators on the four campuses. Some of this stuff went back two decades, and according to some informants, had essentially ruined their lives. The informal process began to resemble a truth commission.

On July 31, the San Francisco Chronicle ran an A-1, above-the-fold headline story <http://www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2007/07/31/NEWCOLLEGE.TMP&tsp=1> on the New College crisis. That evening, faculty, students, and alumni publicly demanded an investigation into criminal wrongdoing by administrators and trustees. On August 2, New College president Martin Hamilton resigned.

On August 10, 2007, for the second time in six months, a hacker disabled Holly Harwood's Stop Silence website, where local media got the leads for the stories that ran over the previous two weeks. The first time it was hacked was back in November 2006, when she first revealed the cover-up of the campus rape scandal by then president Hamilton.

Throughout the 2007 accreditation scandal, which began with a special WASC investigation in February, the administration and trustees of the school maintained a tight-lipped atmosphere on the school's campus. E-mail and phone calls of staff were monitored for leaks, and whistleblowers who requested the investigation were regularly harassed, threatened, or bribed with gag-order severance packages. Absolute secrecy prevailed on the college website, leaving students and faculty blissfully unaware of the college's imminent collapse.

By the time the associated press and higher education journals were covering the story of fraud and corruption, the U.S. Department of Education was preparing to withdraw student loan advance funds. Many faculty charged with advising current and prospective students about their Fall 2007 programs, only found out about the crisis from their students who'd been reading the alumni weblogs. Late in the game, the college administration launched its own weblog as a counter-offensive, but when they were exposed for censoring remarks and information links, they closed it down.

One of the interesting things about the netwar at New College, is that the documents posted by alumni and local media were never public information. All the damning correspondence between WASC, the Department of Education, and the school was private. Only through strategic leaks by conscientious staff to alumni and students, was the public informed of the calamity, and thus allowed to choose for themselves whether to attend or support the institution now on the verge of disaster. No watchdog agencies or trustees took it upon themselves to perform this duty.

To this day, with the exception of minor concessions to faculty and students, the trustees and agencies are operating in secret. Nothing has yet come of the call by alumni for a full accounting of the nepotism and cronyism cited in the WASC reports. No investigation

into improper use of funds and money-laundering has been publicly initiated. No truth commission has been convened. No trustees have been removed from office.

As it happens, a year prior to the fiasco at my alma mater, I wrote a proposal for a research learning center <http://firstsolidthoughts.blogspot.com/2006/07/continuity.html> to be based in San Francisco. With the encouragement of the top political researchers in the country, I'd been looking for a promising academic affiliation in which to house this endeavor. After having my communication program plagiarized by the humanities dean at New College four years earlier, the last place I would have considered was at my alma mater. Ironically, in the summer of 2007, the organizing tools I proposed in developing the program for the school in 2002 were brilliantly put to use by graduates and students of the Activism and Social Change program in combating the entrenched corruption there.

As I explained to my new colleagues in July 2007, the type of conflict in which we were engaging was also the topic of my thesis while studying at the school in 2001-2 <http://tbarj.wordpress.com/2007/07/26/netwar-at-new-college/> . The topic of networked communication in social conflict, in fact, was very much in vogue by the foremost world scholars in the field <http://ijoc.org/ojs/index.php/ijoc/article/view/46/35> [http://www-rcf.usc.edu/~monge/pdf/Storytelling\\_Netwar\\_ECO\\_2005.pdf](http://www-rcf.usc.edu/~monge/pdf/Storytelling_Netwar_ECO_2005.pdf) . My friend Paul de Armond had been published on the subject by RAND in 2001 [http://www.rand.org/pubs/monograph\\_reports/MR1382/](http://www.rand.org/pubs/monograph_reports/MR1382/) [http://www.rand.org/pubs/monograph\\_reports/MR1382/MR1382.ch7.pdf](http://www.rand.org/pubs/monograph_reports/MR1382/MR1382.ch7.pdf) .

In the 2001 survey I did for my senior project <http://skookumgeoduck.blogspot.com/2005/06/research-as-organizing-tool.html> , Paul remarked that anti-democratic activities are not solely the domain of the Far Right, but also include institutions that behave as though they're above the law. The information we uncovered about New College in 2007 corroborated his point.

As Paul observed, "Usually people don't actually do any research at all. They have what amounts to an ideological response to the problem in a complete vacuum of information. It's very rare for people to actually go and collect information. They're almost always reacting to what's almost a fantasy initially." Our experience with New College supporters and progressive media initially, was that the flagship of Bay Area moral theatrics couldn't possibly be as bad as we were making out. As we produced documentation and testimony contrary to the school's marketed image of moral superiority, though, the facade of piety quickly crumbled.

With the flurry of staff and faculty resignations throughout the summer of 2007, as well as declining enrollment as a result of the public exposure of questionable academic and financial integrity at New College, the question remains whether the fraudulent institutional memory projected by the remaining staff and trustees will suffice to once again sweep the dirt under the rug, or if the now easily searchable information about its sordid past will finally bring sufficient accountability to make it a place we can recommend for a quality education. Time will tell.

Jay Taber -- recipient of the *Defender of Democracy* award -- is an author, columnist, and associate editor of *Fourth World Journal*. <http://www.lulu.com/spartacus>