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Radical Media Pragmatism Strategies

for Techno-Social Movements

Die Architektur der globalen Ökonomie geht Hand in Hand mit der Entwicklung eines Netzwerkes einer medialen Globalisation. Dementsprechend ist auch der Aufstieg eines globalen Medienmarktes in den späten 80er Jahren erfolgt. Die neuen Missionare des Kapitals erkannten zunehmend die Bedeutung einer globalen Medienkultur für den liberalen ökonomischen Markt. Globale Telekommunikationssysteme und das weltweite Internet dienen daher nicht den bisherigen kulturellen und aufklärerischen Zwecken öffentlicher Medienanstalten. Umso wichtiger wird es sein, über die sozialen Konstruktionsmechanismen von Medien und die medialen Konstruktionsmechanism von Sozietät informiert zu sein. Daher sind Medienkritik und Gesellschaftskritik nicht mehr von einander zu trennen.

Peter Weibel

I recently found a book in a secondhand bookshop in Amsterdam, *The Information War* by an American journalist, Dale Minor, published in 1970. He defines the phrase as the "seldom physical but frequently bitter conflict between reporters and government officials" who both worked in Vietnam. More specifically he views this clash between journalists and the authorities as part of a broader and more profound conflict "between the democratic imperative of full public disclosure and those forces and tendencies which act to constrict, control and manipulate the information the public gets." The "mass media"–which today play a very instrumental role in theories of information warfare–he dismisses out of hand: very little of it, he argues, bears any relation to gathering and reporting of news. He condemns these media not for their top-down/one-to-many model as such but, rather, for their lack of critical content. For Minor, the "press" is more than a sum of its parts, it embodies an Idea: "The institution of the press is the central nervous system of democracy."

By now, the late nineties, this has come to sound like so many empty phrases. The "media" of which Minor was so critical have entirely pushed aside the concept of "the press" as an organizing principle, and with it all the imperatives of centrality and responsibility. And the censorship Minor's press faced has changed with it: censorship as such may exist under dictatorships, but elsewhere its effects are, precisely, business as usual. To be sure, journalists are murdered occasionally, but generally speaking the media worldwide have turned into an infotainment business. For generations unfamiliar with the Vietnam-era struggles over openness, the idea that media and democracy have an intrinsic relationship may seem odd–new, even.

For the content-based work of artists, activists, and journalists, this is a growing problem. The information industry needs reports (and most of all imagery), but ideas of what is salient have changed dramatically through this process of commodification and technical/editorial transformation. As technical advances have permitted "up-to-the-minute" reports, live coverage, "real-life" footage, the task and form of synthesis has shifted: synthetic, systematic analysis–which used to be the press's reason-for-being–is now the problem of the "information-overloaded" viewer, and ethics, once a driving force, have become a matter of regulatory compliance. More news, more indifference. Information has become our neo-natural environment. Data clouds race across the sky: sometimes they're threatening, but mostly we adjust to this strange new weather.

This is the unbearable lightness of the exploding media universe: more channels, less content, less impact. The Big Digital Bang is threatening to crush (or "liberate") all meaning, to push every cry against injustice out of band and out of broadcasting range. At least, that is the daily despair of a group–perhaps a diminishing group–for whom "media" means more than just a job processing other people's data. But through this data smog and processing fog, the lessons of the Cold War were learned and universalized: through this haze of the "media" we see the vague outlines and traces of invisible psychological warfare, without clear fronts, with a few low-intensity conflicts on the margins. Infowar precludes the friend-enemy distinction, which according to Carl Schmitt is the basis of all politics. But for how long will this go on, we should ask? When will the protective shields of Baudrillard's "silent majority" deteriorate and the general revolt against the Organized Trash start? Today's indifference to the popular can be interpreted as the outcome of specific historical conjunctions (consumerism, democratization). It is not a "natural state" of the masses. The "rage against the machine" will ultimately crush the powers behind disinformation, there's no question. So do we simply wait and gamble on the accumulating alienation that will ultimately turn into a peaceful implosion of the media? Should we, in 1998, wait for "1989" to recur? That scenario probably won't repeat itself.

Better to search for patterns and concepts that will amplify and embody the rise of potentially strong techno-social movements. For this occasion I would like to formulate a framework for a radical pragmatic coalition of intellectual and artistic forces–forces that, so far, have been working in different directions. It is time for dialogue and confrontation between media activists, electronic artists, cultural studies scholars, designers and programmers, media theorists, journalists, those who work in fashion, pop culture, visual arts, theatre and architecture. All these branches, discourses, and traditions are now subjected to the same process of digitization. The benefits and problems of computer networking and mediazation differ across these fields, but their integration into media "synergy" is visible everywhere. Even yesterday's (literally *yesterday's*) skeptics are getting on-line–just as the "early adopters" are beginning to recognize the formations of newer, subtler threats in general computerization.

It's time to overcome the ongoing "culture wars" between disciplines, platforms, and generations. This doesn't mean establishing a political party or a unifying ideology–we don't need either, in fact the effort of establishing them could very likely be counterproductive. We can settle for something more practical: mutual understanding and coordination between different forms of expression would be a huge step in itself, or many, many small steps. For the purposes of Infowar, this means new groupings, new exchanges: between artists and engineers, on one side, working in an effort to formulate principles for interactive design, and the old school critics of mass media content on the other side. In the past, the Internet used to be "new" whereas what came to be called "old media"–mass propaganda–served the establishment. But the situation has been turned upside-down before our eyes: with the rise of "push media", the "digital revolution" of content giants like Time-Warner, News Corp., and Bertelsmann and the near monopoly of Microsoft and WorldCom, the supposed opposition between old and new media is questionable at best.

We don't need network idealists nor Luddites. As Michael Heim points out in his book *Virtual Realism*, "The Luddite falls out of sync with the powerful human energies promoting rationality for three centuries and now blossoming into the next century. The Idealist falls for the progress of tools without content, of productivity without corporeal discipline." The signposts Heim puts up to guide us in overcoming the backlash to cyberspace can be useful in this context (even if, strictly speaking, his subject is virtual reality [VR]). For instance, he

distinguishes between virtuality in the strong and loose, popular sense–and warns that "sloppy semantics leads to false panic and confusion." Rigorous or methodical criticism, on the other hand, can help to tear away at the destructive mythologies that both sides push. The other advice he offers is also helpful… We should avoid glib exaggerations such as "now we're cyborgs" or "everything's virtual reality"; reject any monolithic fear an all-persuasive technology monster; not pretend to re-present the primary world; observe closely those points where VR touches earth-centered applications. "Denouncing artificial worlds as distractions is just as off-balance as wanting to dissolve the primary world into cyberspace." According to Heim, realism in VR will come from pragmatic habitation, livability, and dwelling. "Social transition to cyberspace is as important as the engineering research." Perhaps there is enough of this soft New Age preaching around. But the former "leftist" forces that oppose neo-liberalism and global capitalism certainly need some "healing" and harmony if they want to defeat Babylon.

Lately–since the mid-eighties–it has fallen out of fashion in the West to speak of "propaganda" and "media manipulation." The "manufacture of consent" (a phrase Noam Chomsky takes from Walter Lippmann) has become an abstract, invisible process, without apparent agents or their critics. There are fewer and fewer social movements and organizations that "beat the press." The symbiotic ties between investigative journalists, alternative press, and organic intellectuals within the state or political parties become looser with every day that passes, to the point of dissolution. Grassroots initiatives have fragmented into islands of NGO-nets while, at same time, becoming increasingly professional in orientation and visible in the media. Counter-information that would challenge corporate and governmental policies hasn't disappeared, but it's very quickly losing its vehicles and messengers. We can clearly see this in the diminishing size of the alternative networks of bookshops, distribution firms, publishing houses, and presses. Newer media–video, local radio, public access TV, and the Internet–haven't been able to compensate this crisis in alternative *Öffentlichkeit*, in part because activists haven't been able to grasp these technologies as "media" in ways they´re accustomed to.

On the other hand, though, activists *have* begun to recognize the viral qualities of information. For instance, one can, in time, undermine the images of multinationals by circulating do-it-yourself investigations in small doses; huge demonstrations, boycotts, blockades–organizational nightmares–aren't necessary. There's a historical logic to this shift from mass and class phenomena to smaller-scale efforts: proper, justified, clear arguments of the kind familiar from nineteenth-century reformist movements–it never hurts to have these at one's disposal, but they're not sufficient. And nor does one need a saturation of images, ideas, arguments: a small negative info-virus can have as devastating effects as companies, which depend more and more on "public relations."

This strategic move from the streets to subtler, less obvious spaces–among them cyberspace–has been discussed by the Critical Art Ensemble in their "Electronic Civil Disobedience and Other Unpopular Ideas". "Resistance–like power–must withdraw from the street. Cyberspace as a location and apparatus for resistance has yet to be realized. Now it is time to bring a new model of resistant practice into action." The political collective identity "Luther Blissett" is one such form of cultural sabotage and "semiotic terrorism." The German autonomous a.f.r.i.k.a. group has gathered these strategies together in a handbook for the "communication guerilla"; these strategies vary from classics like fake letters and pie-throwing to ironic demonstrations of support and "image destruction campaigns."

Politicized computer hackers turn up in these stories every so often, but they are still an elusive breed whose potential remains for the most part in the realm of speculation and science fiction.

The information counter-strategy of guerrilla warfare has been on the rise in recent decades. It has tried to squeeze into the Deleuzian currents and has explicitly positioned itself in the realm of pop culture and visual arts (in the case of neoism). But in part these were just artificial constructs to compensate for the loss of lively social movements. Hit-and-run actions need a mass basis to operate from; out of context, though, these semiotic sabotages are merely survival tactics with which small groups bridge long periods of boredom and directionlessness. Until the events appear suddenly: a rave party, a sudden revolt of the unemployed, a protest against rising fascism, road constructions, nuclear transports, Euro policies, airports, social exclusion, immigration laws, a boycott action against Hennes and Mauritz, the eviction of a squat. These things all happen. For the majority, though, these forms of resistance are all but invisible and, therefore, nonexistent. At most, we see an image of some youngsters, defined through their dress code (post punk/neo hippies), rampaging against the already weakened infrastructure; and we usually see these images in a context that supports demands for more "control."

This is the trap of identity politics. Some threads of protest led into the corridors and offices of invisible NGO-network offices; other threads unraveled onto the urban streets, where various "factions" dressed up and merged with the fashion landscape. Neither type is the kind of "meme" that multiplies in any clear way.

This diversification of oppositional politics hasn't led to a "rainbow coalition." On the contrary, it fueled and was fueled by mutual suspicion: "Who is selling out?" "What has been appropriated? By whom? Who's to blame?" "Who's on our side and who isn't? Who's in our circle and who isn't?" Within this paranoiac PC-system, it has become almost impossible to work on the wing or in temporary coalitions with journalists and other media professionals. They've turned out to be on "the other side," not the mediators they once were. This shift, this mechanism, is described in Adilkno's "Cracking the Movement" which deals with the rise and fall of the Amsterdam squatters movement and its changing media tactics. But the "anti-media" attitudes that came of it, which were given explosive power by the lies of the Gulf War, haven't brought about any deeper understanding of "data deprivation" (Herbert Schiller). Nor have more recent alternatives–for example, the radical "net criticism" of the nettime mailing list (since 1995)–been able to correct this situation. Rising above this diversification are those voices booming with fairy tales and diagrams:scientific specialists, artists, and "visionaries" who still predict the downfall of "top-down television" (as George Gilder did in his "Life after Television").

What is needed are autonomous research collectives that critically examine the social, economic, and even ecological aspects of the "IT" (Information Technology) business (so praise Adbusters!). The military-industrial complex, the nuclear and chemical multinationals, and more recently the garment industry–each is faced with a sophisticated opposition, people waging "information war" who have backgrounds as activists. But not the IT business. To build these networks, these collectives, these efforts, we need to go back to classic authors such as Noam Chomsky, Herbert Schiller, or Edward Herman–crucial works on the manipulative aspect of the global media. For these authors, "infowar" isn't tied to the latest military strategies; it's the ability of the ruling class ideologically to dominate and manipulate media channels in order to dominate the world markets. Their link with the Pentagon isn't technical in nature.

This isn't to suggest that the analyses we need will be a simple matter, or that these basic questions don't or won't apply. Take the work of Friedrich Kittler and his school: these analyses emphasize a "military determinism" in their history of media, and emphasize the primacy of US foreign policy over the global media. In this view, technological developments fit into a strategy of a US-dominated Western imperialism. It is worth noting that while both the Chomsky and Kittler schools focus on US affairs before, during, and immediately after the Second World War, the outcomes of their analyses are entirely different. But nor should we concern ourselves too much with these old debates: it's quite clear that the media, and especially their technological branches, are still deeply rooted in the Cold War. And so are their critics. "1989" hasn't had much influence on the discourse of this generation of thinkers; perhaps the only impact of the Berlin Wall's fall on models of infowar mass-manipulation practices was to open up new fields of operation and new "audiences."

A recent example of Chomskian critique of popular journalism comes from the Australian-British correspondent John Pilger in his book *Hidden Agendas*. It describes Tony Blair's "betrayal" of the Labour government and its ongoing assault on the underclass, the recent backlash against aboriginals in Australia, huge arms deals with Indonesia, Burma, and Iraq (also under Blair), the hidden brutal repression in East Timor, the "invisible" bombings during the Gulf War. Pilger's style is accessible, moralistic but not nagging. Far from being academic or even "subversive," he is attacking the news industry from within–from where he orginates and still works, producing documentary films. For Pilger, "manipulation" is not an abstract word: he visits the victims of the English boulevard press, like the striking dockers in Liverpool, and so on. He uses the phrase "cultural Chernobyl" to describe the disinformation that's being spread–"newszak" (like muzak), as Bob Franklin calls it.

Here, Pilger quotes George Orwell, who described how censorship in free societies is infinitely more sophisticated and thorough because "unpopular ideas can be silenced, and inconvenient facts kept dark, without any need for an official ban."

For Pilger there is only one strategy: speak out. He doesn't mention alternative models for dissident media activism. The Internet isn't a serious option for those investigative reporters and critics of the Chomsky class who are used to access to the old style media-for-the-millions (despite their radical critique). Pilger writes, "Technology and the illusion of an "information society" means more media owned by fewer and fewer conglomerates. […] The Internet, for all its variety and potential, is essentially an elite operation as most people in the world do not own a telephone, let alone a computer." This is a cliche used by many of his generation, who cannot (or do not) want to see the battle over the terms under which future generations will communicate. A fight for equal bandwidth, public access, and content that is *not* controlled by corporations or governments. Pilger, and many like him, should take care of the "successor generation," a term used by "atlanticists" to bridge the old UK-US elite and the new Clinton-Blair mould). Pilger quotes Edward Said: "The threat to independence in the late twentieth century from the new electronics could be greater than was colonialism. The new media have the power to penetrate more deeply into a 'receiving' culture than any previous manifestation of Western technology." The systematic refusal here to even mention the existence of back channels is striking. History will judge, to be sure–but not before we have at least tried to build open platforms, our own browsers, interactive systems, public terminals, and to organize net blockades, undermine the dictatorship of identity and the corporate control over media.

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