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Interaction versus Consumption

Mass Media and Art from 1920 to today

From the radio of the 1920s to the Internet of the 1990s

Before we focus on media art, it is necessary first to lay some foundations in the history of technology. Our preliminary thesis is that we have experienced a similar development with the transformation of the Internet from a domain for specialists to a mainstream media since 1990 as we did with the creation of the radio from wireless transmissions in the 1920s.

There is no single inventor of Radio; it emerged from a combination of social and technological conditions. Before World War I, there were already approximately 100,000 such wireless enthusiasts. They formed a communication structure outside of government or commercial control—a kind of rhizomatic collective of initiates. With Morse code, they developed their own language style and collective ideals. A few expanded their transmissions to include talk and music and produced small but periodic "broadcasts" for their colleagues. Before 1920, radio did not exist as a mass broadcast medium. The airwaves were essentially used for point-to-point communication. Radio as a broadcasting medium would soon have arisen out of these amateur transmissions, however, if World War I had not interrupted this development. Here, I contradict Friedrich Kittler's thesis that the origin of radio, in a media historical sense, was World War I and that even today, *all* electronic entertainment media still come from the "abuse of army equipment."

The radio amateurs built their own equipment, since off-the-shelf technologies did not exist and tinkering with the technology was as an important part of their hobby. Through this, impulses for further technical development emerged. These amateurs are the predecessors of hackers and tech-nerds and without intending to, sparked the first "hype" in the history of media. The so-called "radio boom" after the end of World War I led to the emergence of the first electronic mass media. After the end of the World War I, the amateurs who returned from the front resumed their hobby. During the course of the war, the need for military innovation had led to significant advances in radio technology—advances on which Kittler bases his argument. Now, broadcasting talk and music was significantly easier and Morse code was continually interrupted by such sounds.

Radio amateur and family, Cartoon, from Q.S.T., May 1922

The cartoon from 1922 encapsulates the transformation of the medium of the radio—no longer a *communication* medium for male initiates but rather a fascinating *consumption* medium casting a spell over the entire family. The male amateur is in a type of "on line chat" (to use a contemporary notion) with his buddies while his wife and kids simply want to listen to music. Such conflicts take place most likely in some households today: "Kids, first I have to read my email, and when I've finished you can surf the Net."

While the author of this cartoon in 1922 still hoped that the family would also be infected by the fascination of Morse code, the opposite was soon to be the case. The number of those who built radios only for listening to instead of transmitting with steadily increased.

This resulted in a new type of media user—the "ether-flaneur" who explored the increasingly growing frequency jungle. This explorer still worked actively with the medium but increasingly became a passive eavesdropper. His contemporary equivalent is the Web surfers, who use the Internet more as a consumption medium than a communication one and in so doing, lose themselves in the vastness of information. On the other hand, with greatly improved technology and partially with the use of old army equipment, semi-professional "hobby stations" were increasingly committed to playing records or live music and to transmitting occasional talks.

This marked the beginning of the industrial development of the radio in the USA. Until 1921, all radio devices were still home made. With the marketing of electronic components after World War I, the stagnating radio industry recognized a potential for future customers. In November 1920, KDKA, the first commercially paid for and installed radio station went on the air in order to further stimulate the sale of radio components.

Independently of this and before the first industrial stations, there were already the listeners and tinkerers who were the nucleus of the audience for this first electronic mass medium. The same phenomenon soon took place in Europe with the difference that stations were built by governments, not by the industry. Yet here as well, there was an extensive amateur movement that, for the most part, explicitly supported the development of radio programs. This leads us to the summarizing thesis that *the listeners invented the radio.*

The so-called radio boom occurred at the moment when the number of amateurs reached the critical mass, unfolding with its own self-propelled and uncontrollable dynamic. Suddenly the noise-filled birth of a new medium occurred; a medium whose sound resulted in the name of the "Roaring 20s." The radio amateurs were pushed aside by the power of industrial capital, however, and frequencies for their individual broadcasts were increasingly limited. With radio in this marginalized form as a medium for a few technology freaks and harmless hobbyists, the radio amateurs have survived till today. In their place, industry supported the further propagation of the hobby of the radio tinkerer who could no longer operate a station and could also hardly contribute to its further technological development, but instead could purchase pre-produced components and programs. Fifteen years after the radio boom, Theodor Adorno described the "pseudo-activities" of the radio tinkerers as distinguishing evidence for the fetishism and commodification of art that he criticized.

A comparable development took place in the private use of the Internet in the 1990s. A medium for experts, initiates and hackers was transformed into a commercially available commodity. Today email and a personal web site are, like television and the telephone, nothing special. The frustrating floods of spam advertising as well as communication blockages by banner ads with eternal downloading times now replace the enthusiasm caused by the first emails. The "new economy" boom is comparable to the radio euphoria of the 1920s, with both ending in similar fashion: 1929, through the world financial crisis after "Black Friday" on Wall Street and today, the bursting of the Internet bubble and the plummeting of Internet stocks.

Radio utopias in art and politics

What does all of this have to do with art? In the 1920s, radio as a broadcast medium was the glimmer of hope for far-reaching cultural utopias, especially in Europe where it was completely under state control and therefore intended to serve an educational purpose. The radio was even compared to Gutenberg's invention of the printing press and its democratic function was also emphasized.

In the Soviet Union in particular, radio was linked to sweeping political and cultural utopias, in stark contrast to its commercialization in the US. Tatlin's design for the four hundred

meter tall Monument of the Third Internationale (around 1919–1920) was crowned at the top by an antenna for the radio station below. From here, the results of the International Communist Congress that was planned on site were to be transmitted worldwide and incoming broadcasts were to be received.

In fact, Lenin early on picked up on ideas for the distribution function of the radio medium. His telegram over the formation of the new Soviet government on November 12, 1917 began with the shorthand "CQ," which in Morse code signified "to all;" a sign for the new use of the radio as a news medium. As early as February 1920, Lenin wrote to the Russian radio pioneer Mikhail A. Bonch-Bruevich: "The newspaper without paper and without distance which you are creating will be a great thing." Based on this quote, Lenin was characterized as a visionary of the radio age in socialist propaganda. A small part of this exaggeration is true in that he had recognized the potential of the medium two years before the radio boom in the US. Nevertheless, he was thinking above all of the distribution of speeches about revolutionary ideology in a country with numerous illiterates. Thus, the Soviet Union was from 1922 on one of the first countries to support the development of radio through government funding. Due to the difficult economic situation, however, regular broadcasting did not begin until the end of 1924.

Despite these very real problems, the revolutionary-stimulated utopias of artists were already pointing to a possible media future. To take a particular dramatic example among many others, *The radio of the future,* the title of a 1921 text by the Russian writer Velimir Chlebnikov, was comparable "to the consciousness of man," whose new, collective dimension it creates. "The problem of celebrating the communion of humanity's single soul, one daily spiritual wave that washes over the entire country every 24 hours, saturating it with a flood of scientific and artistic news—this problem has been solved by Radio, using lightning as its tool." Like an act of God, the medium descends on humanity. From the earliest exploration of electricity, its connection to nerve reflexes fascinated people intensely. Comparably, the radio fulfilled for Chlebnikov a kind of neurological function so that "the least disruption of radio operations would produce a mental blackout over the entire country, a temporary loss of consciousness." This vital necessity of electronic communication today is without a doubt a realistic scenario out of which the Internet, as stated, developed.

Radio was also imagined as a regular tool of art. Chlebnikov's imagined the "radio reading wall," a colossal public projection screen which showed text and images transmitted over the radio, "will allow every little town in the entire country to take part in an exhibit of paintings held in the capital city … if radio previously acted as the universal ear, now it has become a pair of eyes which annihilate distance. The main radio signal tower emits its rays and from Moscow an exhibit of the best painters bursts into flower on the reading walls of every small town in this enormous country, on loan to every inhabited spot on the map."

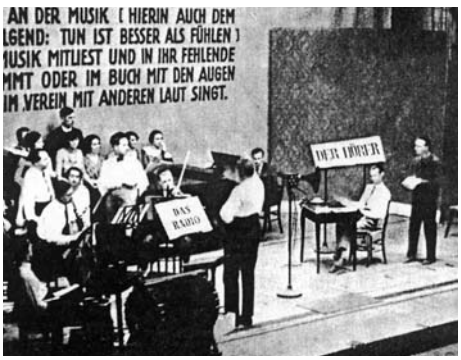
Next to these utopias, Gustav Klucis' 1922 *Radio Orator* is among the few realized examples of a revolutionary art with this medium. The Soviet Union was a poor country in which few could afford a radio. Therefore, public squares with such artistic loudspeakers

Gustav Klucis,
Radio Orator, 1922

served to distribute the speeches of the 4th Congress of the Cominterm and the 5th anniversary of the October Revolution.

Similar utopias were expressed in the debates over the role of the Internet in the 1990s. While aspects of communication persist in the network, the radio functioned as a pure distribution medium. This is the point of criticism of Bertolt Brecht's famous thesis that is known today as "Brecht's radio theory." Although it consists of only of a couple of short texts, it has still had an enormous impact, from the media theory of the 1970s in the work of Enzensberger and Baudrillard to contemporary debates, for example, the motto "do it yourself" of the 2001 transmediale festival, which still refers to Brecht's thesis.

One must read Brecht's thesis, however, in the context of its time. In Germany, the cultural responsibility of the radio was seen as classical rather than revolutionary according to the motto "Goethe and Schiller for all." All broadcasts were transmitted live from the studio. Theater was the most important model and with the help of sometimes very elaborate sonic mise en scène, a kind of acoustic stage set was created. Therefore, radio, far more than film, was used as an illusionistic medium. Brecht counteracted this tendency: "Change this apparatus over from distribution to communication … through continual, incessant suggestions to improve the usage of the apparatus in the interest of the general public, we have to shake up the societal foundation of this apparatus and discuss its use in the interest of a few."



Brecht's staging of the radio play "The Flight of the Lindberg," 1929

Brecht had even attempted to create a model for such a different use of the medium. His radio play *The Flight of the Lindberg,* developed in 1929 as a commission for the Deutscher Rundfunk, sought the active participation of the listeners. They were supposed to take on a part of the presentation at home and sing, speak and hum together with the radio. This was not, however, realized by the Deutscher Rundfunk, so Brecht clarified his intention in the scenic presentation. He gave a short speech in which he declared: "You see placed on one side of the stage the radio and on the other side the listener and you will see that the radio and the listener will perform the work together. They will mutually play, so to speak, hand in hand and so the radio will provide everything that the listener needs (but that is difficult for him to produce) in order to be able to perform his part." This corresponded to the principles projected on the stage which read: "Free roaming feelings aroused by music, special thoughts such as may be entertained when listening to music, physical exhaustion such as easily arises just from listening to music are distractions from music. To avoid these distractions, the individual shares in the music, thus obeying the principle that doing is better than feeling …"

Of course, this is the *model* of a model, since Brecht's unrealized interaction of the listener would have been only a model for a extensive re-fashioning of the radio to a communication and politically revolutionary instrument, an ambition whose technical realization Brecht hardly discussed. It is doubtful whether he knew of radio's origin as a communication medium for amateurs. In actuality, Brecht's listener-interaction model completely contradicts the logic and aesthetic of the medium, the fascination of which consists of the quiet contemplation of distant sounds and the digression into the scenery of the ether. For Brecht, the radio was suspect due to these characteristics, yet it is impossible to reverse the development of a mass medium through art. Perhaps Brecht himself realized this since

he left only a single practical attempt to realize his theories, theories which are still influential today.

From the viewpoint of contemporary media studies, Brecht's suggestions came *too late* since the radio from its beginning was transformed from an open communication structure to a closed, strictly hierarchical broadcast medium, a transformation that could not be stopped through artistic means. From the viewpoint of contemporary art theory, they came *too early* as the artistic precursors of interactive art, since the technological possibilities still do not exist for artists to create a self-programmable communication medium.

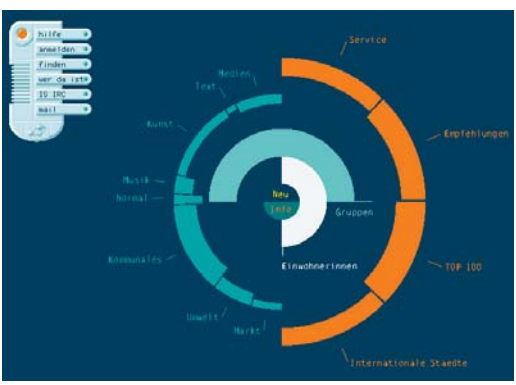
Pioneering artistic projects in electronic networks since 1990

It is only with electronic networks that the technologies for realizing the utopia of a "communication apparatus in public life" (Brecht) have appeared. The early 1990s are seen today as the phase of Net utopia. Yet, even if the concept of utopia contains its own impossibility, the same is true as for the emergence of the radio: the users invent the Net, at least in its social dimension. Industry comes later in the game and takes it over as its market for the future. One only needs to remember that Microsoft in the mid 1990s almost missed the Internet boom. Some of these users were also artists, who along with hackers and amateur programmers are the successors to the radio amateurs before the 1920s, without knowing their predecessors. Two examples demonstrate how artists in the early 1990s developed their own technology instead of only using existing platforms to implement and realize their utopias.

The Thing in 1991, BBS system interface

The Thing was founded in New York in 1991 and has since opened nodes at least temporarily, in Berlin, Frankfurt, Hamburg, Düsseldorf, Cologne, London, Stockholm and Vienna. Its technology is self-developed by its participating artists, based on the BBS systems of the hacker scene. Instead of the usual "tech talk," a conceptual art discourse, independent of any art magazines, took place on the Thing's BBS system and was continued by the users on this international, self-organized platform. Such computer mailbox systems still had nothing to do with the Internet since in 1991 access was only through institutions, principally universities. For the participants, *The Thing* opened up for the first time private access to an electronic network, which for many was a unique experience.

The Thing's founder Wolfgang Staehle was not afraid to draw comparisons with the great role models of the arts: "Beuys' work deals with social sculpture-artistic production that is produced by a group or community. *The Thing* is such a sculpture: it realizes Beuys' idea of direct democracy, the polis as a social structure. Simultaneously, it represents an expansion of the concept of art."



International City Berlin 1996, second version of the interface

The *International City Berlin* emerged from a 1994 Europe wide network of "digital cities" which were already based on the Internet and the WWW. These projects pursued two parallel goals: first, to create general access to the Internet ("access for all," or, *xs4all)* and second, to establish a cultural and social platform for new forms of community with such technologies. The technological platforms were developed from a collective of cultural workers, artists and programmers. Here, as with the radio amateurs, a fully autonomous, self-designed communication world was formed outside of institutional or industrial control. This was seen as a kind of home in virtual space—one is a "resident" in this digital city and not simply a paying customer.

The program of the *International City Berlin* described it in the following way: "New human communications will be initiated through the International City and will influence everyday life in the real city. In contrast to other media, new information will result through social exchange." Instead of Mc Luhan's 1960s concept of the "global village," a "glocale" identity would be formed through the electronic neighborhood in regional frameworks but with an even exchange between each of the networked digital metropolises.

Many of these projects would soon be challenged whether to remain in the realm of alternative, artistic media works or be professionalized into service providers in the rapidly booming commercial reality. Based on this conflict of roles, the *International City Berlin* was dissolved in 1997. It was, so to speak, the victim of its own utopian success. Only one to two years later, a similar pioneer enterprise with a fixed user group, established acceptance, high image factor and recognized innovation potential could have become a million dollar startup in the "new economy." Not even five years after its dissolution, the data of the *International City* were acquired by the M.A.K. Frankfurt (Museum of Applied Arts) as a pioneer project of "digital crafts" and reconstructed to provide access once again and to preserve it for posterity. Thus, in only a few years the lifecycle of the *International City* covered the entire spectrum, from avant-garde to its collapse from commercialization and finally, to its resting place in the museum.

home@aol.com, Advertisement 2003

Commercialization of the Internet

Ever since there has been an industry that delivers Internet access to the home and the mailbox has been stuffed with AOL "100 hours free online" CDs, the aforementioned double objectives of pioneer projects like the Thing and the International City as the last 20th century utopias of a synthesis between technological and artistic progress have become obsolete. Even the advertising tag lines have co-opted and perverted the ideals of the self-organized "residents" of the virtual world: *home@aol.com.*

It is already foreseeable what the ultimate goal of activating the public through the mainstream media is: not emancipation from consumption but rather a high tech-based new round of experience economy in which each action of the viewer has a potential commercial value. When ex AOL CEO Steve Case says that "Increasingly, more people want interactivity," he means that in the future "the viewer can click on a dress of Britney Spears during a TV show and then have it home delivered from K-Mart."

Correspondingly, an MIT research group developed a so-called *HyperSoap* which perfects

HyperSoap, MIT since 1998

the age-old TV principle of product placement. While the action is taking place, each article on screen can be clicked on to receive product information or direct ordering options. For instance: the car that the lead actor drives—"Mercedes Benz 300 SLK, $ 30,000—links to different models and options for a test drive." The beer he drinks—"Tuborg, $ 3.99 a six-pack, delivery in 30 minutes through online order." "The facial tissue which he uses to wipe the tears from his lover's face," "Kleenex, $ 1.99—comes together with the beer." The entire action of the TV show takes place in a kind of virtual warehouse in which the actors react like living store window display dummies. The identification with the star becomes a 100 per cent commercializable factor in which one can purchase the same clothing or furniture, and seemingly become like him/her. Commercial breaks would therefore be superfluous, in fact, counterproductive. Finally, broadcast media would reach a total synthesis between technological and economic structures, a synthesis the divergence of which has been fought against with techniques such as ratings since the days of radio.

The example of *HyperSoap* demonstrates that a principal such as interactivity, developed in the media arts context, is co-opted by the mainstream media and turned into the opposite of its originally intended goal. Or, to once again quote Brecht: "Capitalism immediately transforms that which tries to poison it and immediately relishes it like a drug." The artistic utopia of interactive art as an emancipation of the observer from the consumer mentality that goes against the classical notion of the eternal artwork faces the paradox: its concepts are reused as motors of the new economy and in this way convert everyday media consumption into a totally commercial experience. This confirms the avant-garde status of media art, but does it not at the same time relegate the ideals of interactivity to the historical relics of a past revolutionary feeling?

Which possibilities still exist for media or Net art today? Perhaps the only path is to accept the commercialization of the Net and to work with it in a playful manner. Why not bring the old utopias of the communicative artwork into an eBay auction? Would the public take such an offer seriously? Would they enter into the game, understanding its irony? The answer is, Yes. Blank & Jeron's project *Public White Cube* from 2001 uses the URL publicwhitecube.com and four exhibits by four invited artists in a small gallery in Berlin Mitte. The audience consists partly of the Net and partly of gallery visitors who can purchase the right to alter the exhibition and the artworks. The active participants were ready to pay up to DM 200 so that Blank & Jeron would realize their suggestions for reconstructing the exhibit. Through the project, both artists, who were among the founding members of the *International City Berlin,* could reconsider ironically their own ideas from the pioneering time of the Net utopia. Even as a post-utopian symbol, art still remembers the utopias that stimulated the creation of the medium, but did not become reality with its everyday existence.