



Radio FRO Media Days 2008

Open Networks Shaping Society? Future in Progress!

Media and technologies are blending together; the convergence is in high gear going full speed ahead. The cellphone is becoming the universal device while the Internet is developing faster and faster into a universal medium in multiple senses of the word: the Internet as universal information tool for search, processing and distribution, and as a collective medium gathering together all traditional (electronic) media.

Podcasts, blogs etc. are no longer just recreational playthings by and for info-nerds; they're a means of political propaganda. The Web 2.0 hype revolutionized both (political) communication and (political) advertising. *YouTube*, *Myspace* etc.—acclaimed as stage sets for the design and expression of individual lifestyles—have become platforms for the dissemination of everyday, conventional (political) content and are now even commercial markets. Grassroots sites like Indymedia and Wikipedia no less have become scenes of political strife. They too are being turned into tools that political pros and spin doctors seek to use for their own purposes. The Web acknowledges no differences, which raises big questions that don't have to do with media alone:

How and where are discourses still possible? In the light of growing diversification, is this an obsolete concept? Where are confrontations and negotiations taking place along the entire spectrum of opinions that are being extracted from the ever-growing, inexhaustible multiverse of media and content offerings, and subsequently assembled, processed and re-released? How small and how public are publics? Are multifarious, undifferentiated masses of content tantamount to diversity? How can anyone even get an overview of how diverse the mass of different information or compiled info-fragments actually is?

Sites like *del.icio.us* and *LinkedIn*, free networks and digital communities are shining beacons in the murky info-soup that is the cookie-cutter providers' plethora of offerings. But here as well, caution is advisable with respect to *YouTube* and Co.'s participatory possibilities too.

The public sphere in the real, physical world is also being subjected to massive changes as a consequence of the expansion of the informational technosphere: Digital Graffiti¹, the "digital aura" and other such pervasive computing applications lay in wait to stimulate purchases on the part of passers-by. These aren't random shots but guided missives oriented on our habits of use and consumption via the traces of these that we leave behind as we make our way through the techno-infosphere. Even this very cursory view shows that the expanding and mutating technosphere demands new cultural and social techniques, new forms of medial and technological literacy, and is indeed bringing them forth. TrackMeNot and other plug-ins that help protect web searchers from surveillance and data-profiling are indeed a reactive manifestation, but they're also the result of socially and technologically networked creativity that is itself capable of bringing forth new cultural techniques.

“... no breathing space, history’s being made. Things are moving forward ...”²

Besides these “shadow developments” proceeding as “in a whisper,” old questions come up anew. They have to do with approaches to means of production and to information—both in general and specifically with respect to technological standards and the openness of codes and codecs. Is open the same as free? Is free the same as free-of-charge? Is this a matter of a free lunch or free speech?³ And there’s more: Who can be reached how and by whom? How can content be transported, and how can the gap between sender and receiver⁴ be reduced or eliminated? How can people oscillate between these two states and what’s the upshot when they do? Accordingly, Media Days conceives of “media” and “technology” as instruments of social techniques and social networking, and treats the entire multifaceted complexity of these two conceptual clusters, phenomena that have also been manifesting themselves beyond the domain of technology and formal structures in many spheres of life and in various different ways.

The questions to be asked of mobile telephony, WLAN and radio etc. are the same ones that apply to all the rest of the distribution technologies: Who may use them? Who determines the standards? Is knowledge about them freely available or open? Which forms of usage do they imply or determine?

Thus, manufacturers of WLAN routers, for example, have been using open-source software systems whose firmware is Linux-based, which enables users to customize the firmware, enhance its capabilities and thus explore the limits of utilization. *Funkfeuer*, *Freifunk* and similar projects document self-empowerment, self-organization and creativity that don’t culminate solely in gaming but rather have established themselves in alternative, free and open networks.⁵ In several cases, such initiatives have been able to deliver communications services to rural areas with insufficient revenue potential to attract the attention of commercial providers. In numerous cities worldwide, there have emerged mesh networks that, as autonomous infrastructure, transform the cityscape into a freely accessible online realm. Today, these types of WLAN routers are slowly disappearing from store shelves.

Free media constantly face the question of how different their “own” approaches actually are and whether “new” media are automatically alternative media. And if they are, to what extent? An alternative to what? As Nico Carpentier⁶ has shown, a new picture is crystallizing: Alternative media are neither a new phenomenon nor are they necessarily bound to new technologies. They are an expression of needs that establishment media are not satisfying, and of the practice of eliminating an existing shortcoming and instituting self-empowerment that offers alternatives and demands, fosters and facilitates discourses. The technologies being used are connected to social contexts, historical possibilities and, above all, political-economic facts and circumstances and, in turn, bring forth new social contexts. Technologies themselves—utilized with conscious intentionality and not just consumed—remain tools, whereby one of the consequences of such use is to change the person doing the using.⁷

The infosphere is just as vital to infosociety as the atmosphere is to the biosphere. Access to goods has always exerted a coequal influence on individuals and groups with respect to the spaces in which they unfold their potential. That also holds true for access to the infosphere on all social levels and—from a global perspective—everywhere. Individuals need access in order to be able to articulate, group and orient themselves, and collaborative configurations in order to be able to articulate and organize themselves. And on the macro level, the infosphere constitutes a new battlefield on which civil society’s hegemonic struggle is being fought out. The Dig-

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ital Divide, medial arbitrariness, information overflow etc. aren't problems that only "new" media bring with them. Letterpress printing also brought revolutions in its wake; it temporarily destabilized power, and then it equipped the powers that be with new instruments. That applies to radio and TV just as it does to the WWW and Web 2.0—no breathing space!

Strengths, weaknesses and possibilities lay only partly in the media themselves. Their potential is not confined to their intended areas of use and is thus not exhausted in that delimited purview. It is precisely the experimental use, the socially disobedient acquisition of media and technologies, and the destruction of monopolies that help to explore media's potential. "The big wheel keeps on turning..."⁸ So start blazing those trails! History's being made. Present and future too.

Radio FRO Media Days corresponds to the situation sketched above in that it's hosting a mix of diversified formats, contents and approaches to a very complex subject. Various groups, initiatives and individuals active within (civil) society including Kiberpipa⁹ (Ljubljana), Nico Carpentier (Free University Brussels), Social Impact¹⁰, KUPF (Upper Austria), CMFE¹¹ and servus.at¹² are each taking responsibility for handling a segment of the entire thematic spectrum. Media Days is being staged under the following premises: openness, freedom of thought and action, self-organization, cooperation and participation. All of this is being supported by the organizers via a media-wiki. This production is a work in progress.

Translated from German by Mel Greenwald.

For additional information, go to http://www.fro.at/mediadays/index.php/FRO_Medientage
or http://www.fro.at/index.php?ordner_id=126&l=1

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- 1 <http://www.pervasive.jku.at/Teaching/Master/?filter=vergeben>
 - 2 From "Ein Jahr (Es Geht Voran)" by the group Fehlfarben
 - 3 See <http://www.gnu.org/philosophy/free-sw.html>
 - 4 See the communications theories of Shannon and Weaver, among others
 - 5 See: <http://core.servus.at/node/1003> and <http://www.funkfeuer.at/> or <http://start.freifunk.net/>
 - 6 Nico Carpentier in *Media technologies and democracy in an enlarged Europe. The intellectual work of the 2007 European media and communication doctoral summer school.* (Nico Carpentier et al.), p. 105ff
 - 7 Hartmut von Hentig, "Dem technischen Fortschritt gewachsen bleiben"
 - 8 From a song by the group Massive Attack
 - 9 <http://www.kiberpipa.org/index.php?&newlang=eng>
 - 10 <http://www.social-impact.at/>
 - 11 Community Media Forum Europe, <http://www.freie-radios.at/cmfe/>
 - 12 <http://www.servus.at>