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Forms of Digital Resistance. The Internet and the Constitution of a Transnational Public Sphere

Introduction

Since its beginnings, the Internet has made possible the development of specialized cultures and communities as well as the growth of pre-existing social and cultural groups (Winter/Eckert 1990; Eckert et al. 1991). Recently alternative political and cultural perspectives, which have come from social and cultural practices online, have gained particular significance. Due to its technical possibilities, the Internet offers a radical means of production, distribution and organization of media, which are linked to the experimental politics of the alternative press, independent radio stations and other forms of activist media. At the same time the significance of alternative media and the views that they express can only be understood in the social and cultural context to which they are a response and in which they are produced and received (Grossberg 1992; Downing et al. 2001).

On the one hand, alternative media stand in opposition to the products of the dominant media, because they express different viewpoints, for example by standing up for social changes. On the other hand, they are not as a rule organized or operated in line with capitalist business models. For example the *fanzones* produced by (young) fans – as well as other fan practices in general – are not for profit; in actual fact they explicitly reject this aim (Winter 1995). Of course this also applies to politically motivated alternative media, at times described in recent discussions as *citizens' media* (Rodriguez 2001) because they are based on open access, volunteering and non-profit. In addition, they stand for diversity, plurality and progressive social change.

Thus, many activists see the Internet as a tool to create their own political campaigning space which is supposed to be the basis for a better future. In this way they actively create counter public spheres. In particular, the *social web*, which is based on Web 2.0, creates the conditions for new digital tactics. These aim for a radical democratization of knowledge and the pluralization of voices, views and sources. Reality is thereby defined and framed in many ways which are new and different from the dominant media. Linked to this is the hope of a democratization of global society (Boler 2008), which grows into the concept of a transnational public sphere (Winter forthcoming).

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After a short theoretical examination of the relationship between everyday life, culture and media we will examine the alternative dimensions of the Internet in more detail. Firstly, we will look at the use of the Internet in new social movements and communities that support democratic globalization. Then we will discuss the creation of new spaces through the deployment of tactical media and the possibilities of electronic resistance and campaigning. After that we will analyse the significance of the Internet for (young) fan communities which can be regarded as they significantly contribute to the development of (transnational) counter public spheres. To do this, we will examine above all the role of *e-zines*, which can lay the foundations for transnational alliances. This chapter concludes by questioning the transnational public sphere.

Cultural Studies, Internet, and Alternative Media

Above all, it was the development of Cultural Studies in the 1960s in the United Kingdom (UK) that made the reception and appropriation of media in various cultural and social contexts into an important research topic. Its study of youth subculture, the reception of television and fan culture show that the uses of the media can have aspects which are both subversive as well as socially successful, productive and creative (Winter 1995). These aspects develop into disassociation from or into opposition to the dominant culture and its power structures. The reception and appropriation of television series can, thus, at times be understood as resistance against hegemonic structures of meaning (Fiske 1989; Winter 2001) if for example socially defined roles, forms of identity or expectations of what is normal are subversively undermined, parodied or rejected. Cultural Studies is interested in the everyday changes of meaning, attitude and what form values take, in the development of productive and creative potential of the *Lebenswelt* (lifeworld), in the critique of power relations, in moments of self empowerment which might pass quickly but can still be significant and influential.

Clearly the question remains among these rather optimistic versions of popular culture, if and to what extent cultural and social changes, which go beyond the moment of reception and appropriation, follow on from the empowering acts of media reception in which there is a struggle for meaning as well as pleasure and in which a sense of self develops. The creative everyday practices which deal with the media can also be limited in their effects to helping those actively involved to cope better or to more easily bear the banality of everyday life. This they do by distancing themselves for a while from limiting expectations, by behaving tactically in the structures of power or by making small flights of fancy.

Methodologically, Cultural Studies oppose deterministic concepts as its media research reveals (Winter 2001). They build on the idea that as a development is taking shape, the final outcome remains unpredictable (Hall 1986; Grossberg 1992). In Cultural Studies there are no guarantees. Alliances and effects emerge out of connections and are consequently contingent, not determinate. From this perspective, technology and media are closely connected with social and cultural issues, but they are not limited to this. Tight demarcations are impractical (Menser/Aronowitz 1996). In some respects technology builds the culture and the dominant discourse in twenty-first century. Technology and media are therefore conceived as social active, hybrid forms, which assemble connections, while they are simultaneously shaped by abstract powers (Wise 1997: 57). In technological form and function, material as well as socially constructed restrictions are inscribed (ibid.: 58). Hence, in Cultural Studies, we do not research digital media, which directly change culture. Media are not understood as causative forces, but are rather a priori interpreted as being based on lifestyles, as contextual expressions, as tools or assemblages, which open up spaces for *agency* (Slack/Wise 2006: 154). The view is to focus on how things happen and in which ways they are performed.

Cultural Studies always emerges in the middle of things, within a certain set of surroundings – historical, temporal, geographic, ethnic, sexual, technological – that is, in a milieu. Cultural Studies relate to this milieu by way of the construction of a problematic. (Menser/Aronowitz 1996: 17)

Following Start Hall (1986), technology/media can be comprehended as expressions. This means that the connections that constitute a technology and the practices through which they are expressed have to be investigated. For instance the embattled history of the Internet shows to a lesser extent a linear evolution than an asynchronous configuration of contingent processes (Hand/Sandywell 2002). There is not a singular, monolithic form of the Internet. Rather it is made up of a number of basic related effects. It depends specifically on analyzing social conflicts and historical configurations, in which digital practices assume varied forms.

Referring to Deleuze and Guattari (1983), Wise (1997) distinguishes between two forms of *agency* to avoid deterministic readings. The first is termed *technology* and is embodied. The second form, *language*, is not embodied. Technology and language are connected to one another and assume one another. The social space is therefore the result of this connection. It emerges out of a specific, contingent relationship between language and technology. Cyberspace is frequently understood as one level in the process of democracy. Free citi-

zens, who are controlling machines using language, are exploring cyberspace, trying to achieve their rights and aspiring to social change. In this place, the linguistic *agency* is posed beyond the technical. In this process, new media are often regarded as 'immaterial', as an immaterial empire of information.

Attention, however, should also be concentrated on the fact that technology and, respectively, media act absolutely materially (Slack/Wise 2006: 154). Not only is social space steeped in communication technology, its material nature, their nexuses and alliances are exerting influence on communication, which should be investigated. Thus, on the one hand ideas are embodied in digital media and on the other hand they make substantial demands on the users. A virtual community is made up of a network of material procedures and practices. Certainly in diverse subcultures in cyberspace examples occur of how the actual body is repressed by the users and respectively disregarded in favour of digital worlds.

In Cultural Studies, the question of *agency* gains central importance, as it means in this context that one's acts are controlled by more than free will. *Agency* goes together with the opportunity to effect those processes, which continuously change reality and through which power is wielded (Grossberg 1992). This also reveals the 'conjunctural' aspect of Cultural Studies. The potential of *agency* within new media has to be placed in context. This is why in a social space like the Internet, the expression of the technology has to be examined with the form of the language as Wise (1997) sets out. This should assist the concept of *assemblage* (agencement) by Deleuze and Guattari (1983) to capture phenomenon of emergence, of heterogeneity and of escapism. It is intended to be anti-structural and is exemplified via the concept of *desiring machines*. An assemblage does not have essence, but rather produces qualitative differences. Thus the following questions arise: What kind of interconnections and recursions develop? How is digital technology used and how do people talk and reflect about them? (Eckert et al. 1991; Wise 1997: 73). Which interconnections by machines are formed, if language, desire, and technology come together?

Furthermore, McKenzie Wark (2005) writes in his impressive *Hacker Manifesto* about the emancipatoric possibilities of the *cyber society* in the 21st century. In order to develop its virtual nature, he calls for an end to the commercialization and ownership of information, which for example establishes copyright: "We are the hackers of abstraction. We produce new concepts, new perceptions, new sensations, we en-back them out of raw data" (Wark 2005: 002). The hackers are working in the field of the new virtual means of expressing the actual. Wark sees in these forms of revolt a transforming potential growing, which resolutely controverts the concepts of indifference and homogeneity of

the global information culture, though this is merely a development of the original position.

The 'class' of hackers overcomes artificial restraints caused by a lack of essentials, which for example might be caused by copyrighting. This happens through the development of new forms of expression and a subversive and alternative practice of everyday life. On account of this, the hackers are, according to Michael Hardt's and Toni Negri's *Empire* (2001), an example of new forms of virtual work, which is cooperative and full of productive energy.

In summary, I would like to adhere to the context of new works in Cultural Studies that outline the global information culture as an important issue. For this approach, which is based on social and cultural contexts, we cross the works of Lash (2002) wherein those subjects, objects, and technology are determined on a level of immanence. There are no aims or reasons from beyond and hierarchies or ontological differences do not exist. Instrumental perspectives are going to be deconstructed. Digital technologies are understood as "contingent articulations of asynchrony elements, which potentiate different operations (meanings, metaphors, acts) and amplify the field of cultural practices" (Hand/Sandywell 2002: 213). From this anti-essentialist perspective, which opposes euphoria as well as pessimism but which points out critical emancipatory views (Kellner 1995), one can see the outline of the current social transformations as the modified opportunities of *agency*. This should be made clear by the following discussion, which shows the role of alternative media in the Internet within the development of a transnational public sphere.

Actors conducting political campaigns via alternative media amongst which we include the media protest groups, activists, social movements, subcultures but sometimes also fans and hobbyists, are understood from the start as *channels of resistance*. These question explicitly, deliberately and with commitment the hegemonic structures and issue challenges in a symbolic battle for meaning (Hebdige 1979; Kellner 1995; Atton 2004). They are neither subjected to the laws of market logic nor dependent on the state. They operate in the field of constituent (transnational) civil society (Beck 2002). Nick Couldry (2000) points out that alternative media allow a *community of citizens* to be involved in a democratic practice which is based on dialogue, far-reaching control of symbolic resources and representations of reality as well as on openness.

Thus a new research field is revealed in the area of Cultural Studies that on the one hand examines (digital) media cultures within social movements and alternative communities, on the other hand investigates how these cultures are created by communications in communities and movements (Atton 2004: 3f). According to James Carey (1989), a founder of American Cultural Studies, communication is understood as culture and culture as communication.

In order to be able to use and develop the communicative potential of alternative digital media, diverse media competences, which comprise technical and cultural skills are certainly necessary. The American media pedagogue and cultural theorist, Douglas Kellner (1995) therefore calls for a wider cultural understanding, which comprises new media and which should contribute to the promotion of multiple competencies in particular amongst young people and socially disadvantaged groups. Thus, it should lead to an empowerment of individuals and groups as they learn to competently and effectively employ ICT. In this way, they can portray their problems and interests, which are often not represented in the traditional media. Next, we will illustrate this process through the example of new social movements.

Internet, Globalization, and New Social Movements

Globalization, which shapes our present, is a disputed process, as demonstrated, for example, by the protests against the meeting of *World Trade Organization* (WTO) in Seattle in 1999. These were organized and coordinated using digital media. The neoliberal view of globalization, which is spread by a transnational network of politicians, economic leaders and scientists, is increasingly opposed by the alternative, democratic view which is built on co-operation, inclusion, transparency and participation (Smith 2008). Amongst other things, this view criticizes the fact that the global economy undermines democratic institutions and that power is concentrated in the hands of a small number of countries and corporations. On the one hand, democratic globalization counts on groups and movements of civil society, on the other it depends on independent (non-commercial) media organizations and on Internet sites.

A very good example of alternative media is the creation of the *Independent Media Centre* (*indymedia/IMC*), a collective, egalitarian, and non-hierarchical network of activists who, using reports, photos, and films, question, criticize, and offer alternative perspectives to the representations of reality that appear in the dominant media. Their views are committed to democratic globalization. With all this in mind they try, for example, to raise public awareness of the consequences of global warming and, thereby, to put pressure on politicians and governments.¹ The Internet becomes a performance area. Actions are performed by being expressed. In this way digital technologies also make it possi-

1. The example of *indymedia* is covered by Mattoni in this volume with regard to a grass roots campaign and the question of ICT-supported decentred publics and political institutions is discussed by Mosca/Santucci with regard to e-petitions.

ble for smaller and less organized networks to set out themes, to develop alternative views and to give them their own independent meaning.

Thus, it is above all about changing problems, dangers, and risks, which have long prevailed and often become chronic, urgent, and pressing concerns and must be dealt with. This change is made possible by creating media awareness of the problems. For this, social movements, for example protest events such as demonstrations, employ public spectacles or online campaigns. As a rule, commercial media, which rely on a culture of consumerism (Sklair 1998), rarely do report these protests, which can often have an anti-capitalist nature (Scholz 2008). The new social movements compare human rights and democracy, which should apply universally, against the logic of consumerism, which strengthens and maintains the neoliberal network.

The web-based IMC task, then, is to report on political activism and global campaigns. They bring together local work with global debate, where the global context is crucial for the perception of the movement. As a next step, single campaigns can be used to form transnational coalitions. In addition, these coalitions should help activists to gain and improve skills and competences in the production of media and in electronic communication. IMCs are committed to the principle of *open publishing* and try to create autonomous online zones (Meikle 2002: 92). With that, they take up the tradition of fanzines and the DIY culture (*do-it-yourself*) formed by young people (ibid.: 97). This culture linked green radicalism with direct political action, new musical sounds and experiences. The IMCs succeed in showing a different and, above all, a more complex picture of social movements than the mainstream media. They also succeed in framing them with greater differentiation and diversity.

The new social movements, therefore, use the Internet in their *network of active relationships*, which are based on communicative as well as interactive practices, and on negotiation and decision-making processes (Melucchi 1996). In addition, the practices of *indymedia* aim to democratize journalism because everyone is called to work as a journalist and they are given access to the technical capabilities for this. Furthermore, the practices of traditional journalists and their positivist concepts of objectivity and impartiality are radically questioned. In contrast to this, the alternative online journalism presents an ethic committed to the community and this is partial, involved, and connective (Atton 2004: 37). Thus, in its socially contextual and self-reflective aims it fundamentally questions traditional journalism.

Tactical Media and Social Software

A further example, which I would like to explore and which is linked to the use of the Internet in social movements, is the concept of the tactical media which are often used for grassroots campaigning (see for example Matroni in this volume) and articulate dissident positions through artistic practices and *do-it-yourself* media (Lovink 2004). Based on Michel de Certeau (1988), tactics rely on the opportunities that appear in the spaces and times organized by strategies. These times and spaces are distinguished by heterogeneity, a spirit of invention, artistic skill and the combination of opportunities. He writes:

In contrast to the strategies [...] I describe tactics as a calculated action, set by the lack of having something of one's own [...] The tactic has only a place separate from normality [...] Without a doubt this non-place makes mobility possible – but always dependent on the circumstances of the time. This mobility allows it to quickly grab the opportunities which the moment offers. It must be alert to use the gaps which appear in particular situations in the surveillance by the power of the owners. It poaches from this and keeps surprises in store. (de Certeau 1988: 89)

Different to political action, tactics therefore do not necessarily have future aims nor a clearly identifiable opponent. Thus they are also not based on the collective identity of a social movement. Rather, they represent points of resistance, as defined by Foucault (1987), in their relationship with power. Socially constructed spaces produce tactical media. In these spaces, by means of communicative resources, there is an evolving exchange of ideas and imaginative powers, of discourses, and subjectivities, which are at least temporarily disobedient and resistant. They can also be understood as contact zones as shown by Alessandra Renzi (2008). Therefore the meeting of artists and activists on a mailing list can lead to new tactical media projects. Geert Lovink (2004: 232) states that “[t]actical media are never perfect, they are always to be understood as developing, in performance and pragmatically, involved in a continuous process, analysing the conditions of the channels with which they work”.

In this context, *Temporary Media Labs* should also be referred to. These are arranged at art exhibitions such as *Documenta* but also in other areas in order to initiate and promote transnational cooperation as well as to contribute to a media empowering of the user. They create a space for experiments and negotiations. Furthermore, tactical media enable the formation of new subjectivities and new forms of criticism as the work of the *Critical Art Ensemble* (1996) for electronic resistance illustrates. Thus, they direct for example electronic civil

disobedience or celebrate the utopian possibilities of plagiarism in the age of the Internet.

Internet and Fan Communities

Less spectacular than the tactical media activists but nonetheless of great significance are the (young) fan communities and their social worlds, which have grown or are just developing online. Research to date has shown that, contrary to wide spread prejudice, fans – and this even applies to young fans – are active and creative consumers who want to transform their received knowledge into their own productions of texts, films or art (Winter 1995: 199–211, Winter 1999). Thus, it is possible to differentiate between different forms of fan production, between semiotic, expressive, and textual productivity (Fiske 1992).

In the counter public sphere of fans, fanzines, and newsletters have great significance. On the basis of textual productivity, these fanzines and newsletters establish communication beyond the local area and also facilitate the coordination of fan activities. They are made by ‘competent’ fans for fans. Their articles, which are based on detailed and specialized knowledge, judge, criticize, and celebrate their respective cult objects such as television series, science fiction films, or progressive rock. For fans, the production and circulation of new and alternative meanings are, thus, linked with enjoyment and can affect a sense of community. In this way fan cultures can develop counter discourses and challenge constructions of power.

The *e-zine*, the Internet edition of the fanzine, makes it on one hand easier to access information because fanzines are now available worldwide. On the other hand, the creation of communities by fans, based on their specialized interests and their shared knowledge, becomes more achievable. *E-zines* contribute to the reproduction and the expansion of minority specializations and tastes, to which mainstream media give little or no attention.

In addition, the Internet improves requirements for fans to translate the knowledge they have gained into joint projects. It is this knowledge which also determines their status in their social world. Fans value, for example, *e-zine encyclopaedias*, to which they can bring their knowledge as enthusiasts, collectors and experts. Therefore there are webpages developed for this purpose. A good example of this is the *Gibraltar Encyclopaedia of Progressive Rock* (www.gepr.net), in which every entry is written by fans. Their declared aim is not only to include known groups but also to describe discoveries in this field. Many artists even have different entries with the result that a variety of commentaries and critiques are available, which conventional rock encyclopaedias cannot keep pace with (Atton 2004: 149).

Here we must consider that as a rule fans are self-taught, that their knowledge comes not from formal education but rather from passionate engagement and a lifelong interest. If their knowledge is circulated within fan communities, this raises their reputation and their (popular) cultural capital. Ideally fans on the Internet become engrossed in a democratic discussion, celebrating the object of their desire. This was also possible in fan communities in the past (Winter 1995: 127) but the Internet helps to improve this form of communication and to make it easier.

Conclusion

We have shown that the Internet allows for the articulation of various alternative voices, positions and perspectives. It can a platform of marginalized individuals or groups but also aesthetic communities such as fans or social movements, which fight for a new democratic space. The examples of tactical media practices show that new opportunities for participants also develop to fight for spaces for freedom and to question traditional ideas of copyright and creativity by fighting for a *digital commons*, for a *free culture* (Lessig 2004) which must be protected from the state and the economy. It has become clear that on the Internet there are creative resistance practices as defined by Cultural Studies. As a rule, however, their beginnings, perspectives and aims are not limited to the Internet. Therefore, at the sociological level it seems problematic to only emphasize the virtual world and to speak of an online *socialization* or an online *Vergesellschaftung* (Jäckel/Mai 2005). The alternative online practices illustrate that the internet can be used in various and complex ways. There is not one Internet but rather various forms of articulation which originate *offline*. The future will show whether, alongside the already existing counter-public sphere, a functioning transnational public sphere will form where all individuals and groups can participate worldwide. We will also see what role the Internet can play in this (Winter forthcoming). Can political web campaigns for example help develop a transnational public sphere in which emancipatory political opportunities are developed and which reveals a counter force to the neoliberal organized world economy (Fraser 2007)? The hope of democratic and social transformation in the 21st century remains closely linked to the new digital practices like web campaigning. In the context of Cultural Studies, it is about tracing these changes in the habits of everyday life and its social and cultural practices (Winter 2001).

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