

# Democratic Participation, Agency, and Technological Forms of Life. Cultural Studies, Digital Media, and Processes of Democratization

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## 1. Digital Media: Between Participation and Control

In the context of Cultural Studies, the process of creating and circulating meaning is considered to be the central part of culture. It involves media technology and is based in the everyday experiences and practices (cf. Winter 2001, Winter 2007) which shape our lives and give them meaning. Meaning arises in practices of media and technology usage. Because of its performative nature, it is then performed (cf. Denzin 2003). A form of agency is written into the media itself, because it structures and orders links to the environment, it frames our relationship to the world, and it conveys concepts of space and time which decisively change our lives (cf. Winter/Eckert 1990). Technology/media and culture cannot be separated so we can speak of a technological culture (Slack/Wise 2006) or technological forms of life (cf. Lash 2002). Our interest, however, in the following is directed mainly at the question, as to which social and cultural significance, as well as to which function, can digital media technology gain in their interaction with human agency in cultural and social contexts. In this, media-conveyed forms of life arise in the association of people and media technology.

In the perspective of Cultural Studies, digital media technology (such as the Internet, digital video devices, wireless networks, or the World Wide Web with its technological possibilities of publication and the sharing of information) do not possess an inherent (material) character, from which social and cultural significance and uses can be fully deduced. The internet has been, and still is, often seen as liberal, open, and democratic as a consequence of its decentralized structure

allowing interactivity and participation. The medium itself seems to have these characteristics and to encourage corresponding social and, cultural processes. We think, however, that it depends on the social context of the communication as to whether the internet is used, for example, as an extended shopping trip, to spread rumors, or if its potential is realized, in order to bring about democratic, cultural, or social change. Even the differences between virtual and real communications rely on social and cultural contexts of use. Thus the interactive link between different media eases the flow of information across technological, geographical, and social borders. Therefore, for example, protest groups can communicate their messages and their campaigns easier, more quickly, and more efficiently, because the internet is a form of public which is relatively easily accessible and which can be used independently of mass media.

However, since 9/11 it has become clear, that, for security reasons states strive to filter and to control content and consequently, they develop methods specifically aimed to do this. Even if the flow of information and communication has become global, new software makes it possible to control the information to which a state's citizens have access. More recent studies show that these control practices, which can be linked to strict regulations and which can mean that users' activities are punished severely, are not only limited to states known for this in the press such as Iran, China, or Saudi Arabia, but can be operated throughout the world and are increasing (Deibert 2008: 143f.). It is in the logic of these processes, that once control capacities are developed, they are extended and increased. They change the architecture of the internet. Therefore, it can provide the infrastructure, "das Gestell" (Martin Heidegger), for the new form of power in the global control society (Deleuze 1993).

Beside these political forms of internet censorship, there are also other forms of censorship, which are connected to the increasing commercialization of the net. There is growing pressure to protect intellectual property and copyright. These efforts appear increasingly obsolete, and occasionally obsessively reactionary, in the framework of the digital world which contains the promise to create a non-commercial media system which is not profit based.

Thus, Lawrence Lessig has emphatically suggested that a code is in no way neutral or transparent, but is actively a part of that which can be communicated (Lessig 1999). For example, the Apple *iPod* or the Sony *Playstation* ensures that their software can only communicate with their users. Lessig shows that codes are integrated in the architecture of the internet and can change it considerably. The attempt to curb or to prevent data piracy can thus lead to information being bought or sold only through certain channels but also to the prevention of a democratic exchange of ideas and their creative redevelopment (Deibert 2008: 142). Consequently, recent research of the "open net initiative" concludes that the wide spread evaluation that the internet creates a borderless world of free flowing information, must be qualified decisively. The different censorship strategies limit the possibilities of non-government organizations (NGOs) and other civil social networks to spread and share information and to carry out social campaigns (cf. *ibid.*: 150). Thus, according to Deibert and his colleagues, the internet is a "patchwork quilt". Admittedly, as we will show, a transnational social movement has arisen as a reaction to this, which would like to keep and extend the internet as a forum for freedom of expression and free, equal access to information. Their origin is the criticism of digital surveillance and control practices, their aim is the development of forms of "sousveillance", of reverse-surveillance (*ibid.*: 157).

The digital world in the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century is therefore not only regulated and controlled by businesses and states, but also gives users opportunities to participate. The internet can be used in various ways, like every media technology, and finds itself in a continual process of change. Cultural and social conflict over the internet leads to its dynamic, fluid, and procedural features. Even in content and form, it changes constantly. Structures are reconfigured, new uses are added, and old ones disappear.

For the democratically motivated agents of civil society, the internet has been, from the start, a tool to produce virtual networks, which at the same time, other social powers would like to increasingly regulate and control. For example, after 9/11 digital dissent in the USA has developed in the form of political blogs, online discussions, or forms of cultural jamming, which seriously criticizes the politics of the Bush administration and the coverage in the central media for being one

dimensional and for their vindication of war. The simulacra of the media (Baudrillard 1991), which creates hyper-reality from reality, contrasts truth, which is based on knowledge created and shared by activists on the World Wide Web (cf. Bolter 2008: 6). While for the mass media the division between producers and consumers of news is significant, increasingly the borders between author and public are becoming hazy in the internet. On one hand, the digital dissent is based on the perception that the facts presented by the dominant or central media are often interest led constructions, though they seek to hide this very fact. On the other hand, it is based on the need to produce self-reflexive representations which are responsible to the community of users (cf. *ibid.*: 8). Tactical interventions by means of digital media should demand and question coverage of the mass media as defined by oligarchs and media moguls through alternative descriptions. In this way, the illusion of transparency (Vattimo 1992), which the conventional media coverage conveys, is deconstructed and reality is newly defined.

## 2. Contexts of Use – The Development of Agency

In Cultural Studies theory, an understanding of digital media and networks is only possible when the social and cultural contexts of their use are considered. As Lawrence Grossberg establishes, "the practice of Cultural Studies is radically contextual" (Grossberg 1999: 58). Object and subject, media technology and context are related to one another and communicate with one another, they strike up various links and create networks. Thus, social and cultural usage practices have an influence on the material world which cannot be underestimated. The users construct and produce, through habitual media use, a medium suitable for the given situation. Media can therefore be understood both in its materiality as well as in its social constructions. It is formed through cultural and social contexts. The internet, or the World Wide Web, can be understood as a cultural technology which has produced its own special logic of production, spread, and consumption (cf. Berland 2000). Media technologies are not only instruments, but are also linked to practices which change our "being in the world" (Martin Heidegger) by framing it anew. They imply new relationships to the environment and create their own frameworks of meaning.

For example, many hopes, fears, and wishes are linked to the digital and network media in the cultural imagination. Each field of social, cultural, and personal life is expected to be significantly changed by it. Often cyberspace is also described as a rhizome (cf. Deleuze/Guattari 1977), as a root-like nexus of multiplicity, which produces affective relations and forms of being. These are described, for example, in the cyberpunk literature of William Gibson, who introduced the concept of cyberspace, or in the novels of Bruce Sterling (cf. Winter 2002). Object and subject, people and machine, organic and technological systems, technology and social context are interlinked, producing "technological forms of life" (Lash 2002: 15). The intensive use of mobile phones, laptops, or camcorders turns us into a Human-Machine Interface (cf. *ibid.*).

Since its beginnings in researching television (cf. Fiske 1987, Fiske 2001, Winter 2009), Cultural Studies has rejected determinist conceptions. Cultural Studies is led by the belief that we cannot judge how a development will end when we look at its beginnings (cf. Hall 1986, Grossberg 1999). For Cultural Studies, there is "no guarantee". Links and effects arise from various articulations; they are not causally determined and they are contingent. Technology/media are closely linked to the social or the cultural, but cannot be reduced to the process of constructing meaning. Strict demarcation is not possible (cf. Menser/Aronowitz 1996). Thus, media technology is understood as socially active, hybrid forms which produce links. However, at the same time, they are coded by abstract powers (Wise 1997: 57). Materially as well as socially constructed limitations are built into the form and function of the technology (cf. *ibid.*: 58). Therefore, Cultural Studies does not investigate whether digital media affects cultural change causally. These are not understood as original powers but rather from the start they are seen as embedded in forms of life, as contextual articulations, as tools, or as assemblage, which also reveal a space for agency (cf. Slack/Wise 2006: 154ff.).

Interest is therefore directed at how something happened and how it has been accomplished:

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 relates to this *milieu* by way of the construction of a *problematic*. (Menser/Aronowitz 1996: 17, emphases in original)

According to Stuart Hall (1986), media technology can be understood as articulations, as "an unnecessary link to different elements, which bound in a particular way, construct a specific unit" (Slack 1989: 105). This means that we must examine the links which construct technology and the practices which they articulate. In the embattled history of the internet, there is less of a linear development revealed than a non-synchronous configuration of contingent processes (cf. Hand/Sandywell 2002). There is not a singular and unified internet which produces necessary effects in a causal way. Instead, it depends on examining the social struggles and historic configurations in which digital practices take on different forms, in order to be able to define the relationship of agency and forms of life more precisely. The social components have therefore an essential influence on the material culture or the objective material world. In line with Latour (2008), a society uses its technology to give itself permanence.

In the context of Cultural Studies, agency depends on the possibility of intervention in cultural and social processes, through which power is expressed and which can continually change reality (cf. Grossberg 1999). Consequently, the global availability of the internet, which is not yet in place, could be a basis for developing a democratic agency which leads to a fully developed transnational civil society (cf. Kaldor 2003). This would cross territorial borders and also put demands on national governments and on global institutions. These demands limit the power of global capital and reveal the possibility of democratic participation and emancipation.

In this way the conjunctural aspect of Cultural Studies becomes clear. Then the possibility of agency in the context of new media can be defined contextually. Thus in a social space like the internet, along the lines of Deleuze and Guattari (1992), the articulations of the machine-like assemblage (content) with the assemblage of the enunciation (expression) must be examined, as Wise (1997) shows. Therefore, the concept borrowed from Deleuze and Guattari (1974) of assemblage (*agencement*), is intended anti-structurally and is exemplified in the case of desiring machines. This concept should help us to under-

stand phenomena of emergence, heterogeneity, and of the fleeting. An assemblage does not have essence, it produces qualitative differences. This leads to the following questions: Which coupling and recurrences arise? How is digital technology used and appropriated? How are they spoken about and contemplated? Which stories, metaphors, experiences characterize the interaction with digital technology? What coupling, what human-machine interfaces occur when language, desire, and technology come together, when human and non-human bodies, actions, and passions meet? The internet consists of links; it does not have a solid identity or an organized centre. There is also no truth which underlies the links. The internet is characterized by a continual process of deterritorialisation.

In a central techno-colonial discourse, which is fostered in science, economy, and journalism, the web stands for freedom, individualism, for mobility, for disembodiment, and the conquering or abolition of space. It contributes to a "mobile privatization" in the sense of Raymond Williams (1977). You can be everywhere and nowhere at the same time. In this context, Berland shows that there is also a rival narrative.

But techno-evolutionism also offers a countering narrative, in which the Net enables us to transcend the hierarchy, isolation, and disempowerment produced by earlier technologies, and to evolve toward a new postcapitalist, postnationalist, truly interactive collectivity. (Berland 2000: 254)

Similar to the cyberpunk authors, who were essential contributors to the development of cyberculture, users also construct, in specific ways, digital media in everyday life through the symbolic tales which they tell and through their socially habitual usage. Even the design, the introduction, the marketing, and the use of new technology/media is incorporated into a circuit of culture, which articulates various processes and has varying and previously undefined consequences (cf. Du Gay et al. 1997). The conditions of the social-cultural framework effect the results in a certain place, at a certain time.

What ICTs can accomplish for any particular political system will have very much to do with what members of particular communities, individually and collectively, deter-

mine to do with such technologies in particular contexts. Economic and cultural forces, public policy, democratic design, and grassroots initiative will all have a role in framing the future of electronic democracy. (Shane 2004: XII)

Even if there are many references to the increasingly liquid nature of temporal and spatial borders in the worldwide flow of information (cf. Lash/Urry 1994), these have further significance from the view of Cultural Studies. Local conditions and spatial constellations remain significant in the patterns of perception, thinking, and interpretation despite the structuring and ordering power of digital media technology. It is precisely on the internet that questions are asked and problems are discussed relating to local and global themes and these issues are also dealt with globally as well as locally. Users interpret the messages which are conveyed worldwide from the background of their own social and cultural contexts (cf. Winter 2003), which can be characterized by the peculiarities of a concrete place.

### 3. Internet, Globalisation, and Democratic Agency

The availability of communication through computers intensifies and demands globalization processes because they make possible an increasing worldwide network which influences all aspects of our everyday life. Deterritorialized markets are formed through the merging of advanced surveillance technology and electronically based information systems. These markets are not bound to national borders. They form a "techno-capital" (cf. Kellner 1989), which presents the material basis of globalization. Transnational corporations sell products and services worldwide. Through the same technology, however, the creation of thousands of civil social organizations and groups has also become possible. These are more flexible, more diverse, and, at the same time, more complex in their structure than earlier social movements and create (virtual) counter public spheres. Besides the relatively institutionalised NGOs there are globally orientated social movements or "grassroot" organizations. As has become clear in the last ten years, on specific occasions these can organize resistance, possibly involving many people. For example, over 20 million people

worldwide engaged in protests against the invasion in Iraq. The worldwide protest would not have been possible without the internet and its possibilities for co-ordination and global communication (cf. Bennett 2003: 24). Therefore Lauren Langman states:

But what must be noted is that the rise of the Internet, as new communication media, has enabled new means of transmitting information and communication that has in turn enabled new kinds of communities and identities to develop. These new kinds of Internet-based social movements, cyberactivism, are fundamentally new and require new kinds of theorization. (Langman 2005: 44)

Furthermore, the global economic and technological changes have considerably altered the institutions of modern society (such as family, work, community). These, as Anthony Giddens (1991) has shown, also have important consequences for self-identity. These consequences include negative, as well as ontological uncertainty, fear, and discomfort because we must accept personal responsibility for structural problems, such as unemployment. From a positive perspective, however, room for individual agency is increased. Therefore we can choose, shape, and change our personal relationships (cf. Winter/Eckert 1990) and also our identity, because traditional controlling authorities (such as family or church) move into the background or completely lose their influence. Individuals and groups must then locate themselves in a global system of meaning carried by the media and must actively create their identities which have become a reflexive and open project.

Furthermore, identities are also emotionally embedded. Social formations can grant emotional security as well as revealing a space for agency. Thus, social movements produce collective identities which emerge in the interactive processes of social networks (cf. Melucchi 1996). On the whole, these movements negotiate the meaning of their actions, their values, and their aims themselves. Consequently, Richard Kahn and Douglas Kellner (2005) have shown how post-subcultures are formed in the virtual sphere. These post-subcultures create dense interpersonal networks of discussion, deliberation, and intensive argument. On the basis of alternative cultural or political

attitudes and experiences, which are shared with others (who are spatially removed), identities are re-defined and democratic spaces are expanded. It seems that it can be precisely traced back to the intensified processes of individualization, whereby the internet is used to find like-minded partners who give similar interpretations to problems and their possible solutions. Thus, cosmopolitan communities are also formed. These consider local conflicts and crises in the context of global threats and changes such as the global-justice movement, which were formed around the turn of the millennium. The transformation of identity also flows into new collective forms of democratic protest. For example, the transnational activist networks generally accept the different identities of their members. "The internet happens to be a medium well suited for easily linking (and staying connected) to others in search of new collective actions that do not challenge individual identities." (Bennett 2003: 28)

Beside the centers of the networked world, there are, however, whole areas, which are excluded by these forms of communication. The availability of technology is characterized by great inequality. Exclusion from digital networks can take on different forms: the necessary technological infrastructure may be missing, there may not be enough internet connections, there may be insufficient cultural capacity or training to be able to use the internet competently, independently, and maturely, and finally, there may be difficulties in availing of opportunities for personal productions and distribution over the virtual network. Certain cultural areas (in Africa, for example) are less bound into the digital network than the technologically advanced areas in North America, Japan, or Europe. Therefore, we cannot, at present, speak of a worldwide transnational (and thus global) internet space. Areas or states which are not connected to the net or have insufficient connectivity, do not exist so to speak – at least digitally –, appearing on the screen merely in passive references, which Castells describes as "black holes in information capitalism" (Castells 2003: 396).

The capital, work, information, and market networks link people and localities to each other in the whole world through technologically worthwhile functions, however, they extinguish from their networks those populations and territories, which no longer have a value and an interest for

the dynamic of global capitalism. From this follows the social exclusion and economic meaninglessness of social segments, districts, regions, and whole countries which open that which I call the "the fourth world". (Ibid.: 387, translated by Andrew Terrington)

To contrast this, in global cities, for example, hyperconcentrations of complex infrastructures with various adjoining resources are found. As an example, Sassen points to the fact that New York City has the highest concentration of buildings with fibre optic cabling (Sassen 2000: 334). There exist certain determinable geographical communication concentrations. Civil social movements point precisely to these inequalities and make a case for the further expansion of digital networks in order to link those regions to virtual structures which until now have not been available to them.

A broadly networked world is the basis for the build up of a global civil society (cf. Andretta et al. 2003: 19) in which a transnational perspective on social and cultural problems and on risks is developed and common solutions can be sought. Thus, a counterbalance can be created to the present power constellation. Again and again, the national state, whose authority is linked to a specific territory, is no longer in a position to decide on transnational corporations. These corporations have a moving flow of capital which crosses borders and transcends national spheres. Therefore, a transnational public sphere, which represents a radicalized ideal of democracy and broadens the spaces for a play for autonomy and participation, is necessary. In this way, it can come to a redistribution of power (cf. Fiske 1993, Kellner 1995, Winter 2001). A critical media use can lead to the development of alternative positions which are not represented in the central media. The consequence can be oppositional politics, which places existing balances of power in question and so strengthen the democratization processes "from below". Admittedly, in order to be able to use and develop the communicative potential of digital media, various media competences are necessary. These competences include technical and cultural skills. Thus Douglas Kellner (2005) demands a broader understanding of education to include new media which should add to the demand for multiple competences, particularly among young people and socially deprived groups. It should lead to an empowering of

individuals and groups by teaching them to competently and effectively use information and communication technology. In this way, they can outline their problems, interests, and perspectives which are often not represented in traditional media.

Above all, however, transnational civil social movements manage to mobilize these latent communicative potentials. Information which does not have to overcome the filter of the central media, circulates in virtual networks, is exchanged, and is the basis for democratic interaction. New forms of online activism and cyberpolitics emerge. The transnational groups and movements which fight for an alternative globalization or the 'global-justice' movement would be inconceivable without the internet (cf. Langston 2005: 44) and are important agents in the globalized network society as described by Castells. This society is characterized by 'flows' and has an increasingly 'fluid' and transient character.

Furthermore, new information and communication technology has essentially contributed to a rapid development of a complex transnational network structure. Over virtual portals, today's campaigns, protests, conferences, and virtual actions are planned, organised, and documented (cf. Baringhorst/Kneip/Niestyo 2009). They do not only connect a giant pool of information but also a great potential for communicative resources with names like the *People's Global Action* (PGA).

Additionally, Ulrich Beck points to the fact that the (political) consumer can decide for or against products and therefore is a counter power to capital.

Consumer protests are *as such* transnational. *The consumer society is the real existing world society* [...] Well networked and purposefully mobilized, the released, free consumer, if transnationally organized, can be formed into a sharp weapon. (Beck 2002: 28ff., translated by Andrew Terrington)

Even here, however, civil social agencies are needed. Agencies mobilize and organize these counter powers in media campaigns. Through its networked, peripheral logic, the internet can help put into perspective the size of references, which until now have been national, and

can help embed or extend a transnational perspective. The new transnational activism is clearly seen in the example of the transnational Zapatista solidarity network (cf. Olesen 2005) in the anti-capitalistic protest movements which formed across the world after resistance of the Zapatista in 1994 which called for dialogue, equal participation, and sharing of perspectives (cf. Notes from Nowhere 2007) or in the protests linked to this under the motto "Another World is Possible" (Starr 2005). However, even this would not be possible without networking through digital media technology. The task of critically considering the activities and operations of dominant institutions, and where applicable to protest, is, above all, fitting for the transnational (virtually networked) public sphere which is evolving in the framework of a global civil society. In this way a fully developed global civil society can present a counter power which is built from below on transnational processes, which are embedded in every day practices and the ordinary people's forms of life. These ordinary people place various counter hegemonial powers against the homogenizing, top down power strategies, which are based on alternative uses of the media (cf. Fiske 1993, Fiske 1994, Kellner 1995).

We can link the difference between transnational processes from above and from below with the concepts of globalization from below and globalization from above (cf. Appadurai 2000). By globalization from above, we understand processes which spring from institutional establishments, political elites, or businesses, while we speak of globalization from below when we consider civil social agents, communities, or single individuals trying to deal with global consequences. Transnational processes from above are critically considered from democratic standpoints. Thus, Hand and Sandywell criticize the fact that "the objective of transnational production remains the same - profit and capital accumulation in the economic sphere, hegemony in the political sphere and ideological domination in the cultural sphere" (Hand/Sandywell 2002: 102). In this sense, transnationalization from above would be partly understood as a tendency to homogenization, against which there is a struggle by social movements, transnational protest networks, and NGOs in the sense of a globalization from below. Examples of this are transnational mobilizations, demonstrations, and movements which can deal with various themes and problems. In

the establishment of a global civil society, it is about having a political arena in which citizens and collective agents can work together over borders, in order to achieve their aims or to cause governments and formal institutions to change their policies.

The globalization shaping our present, is, thus, a multidimensional and embattled process that, for example, has been highlighted in the protests against the 1999 meeting of the World Trade Organisation in Seattle. These protests were organized and co-ordinated by means of new media. However, the movement campaigning for a "globalization from below" did not begin in Seattle but long before, in the post colonial context of the South (cf. Starr 2005: Chapter 1). The neoliberal image of globalization, which is spread by a transnational network of politicians, economic leaders, and scientists, increasingly contrasts an alternative, democratic idea which is built on co-operation, inclusion, transparency, and participation (cf. Smith 2008). This criticizes, among other things, the fact that the global economy undermines democratic institutions as well as the concentration of power in a small number of countries and businesses. On the one hand, democratic globalization relies on groups and movements of civil society, but on the other hand it relies on independent (non-commercial) media organizations, listservs, and internet pages.

We have, on the one hand, those who support the neoliberal globalization processes which, all things considered, are proceeding undemocratically and which are given political and media authority. While on the other hand, there are the critics of neoliberal globalization who, however, must equally use the global digital communication and information structures in order to be able to articulate efficiently and to develop their agency. Therefore, according to Andretta et al. (2003), new social movements often network today under the motto "new global" and not "anti-global" as central media claim. It is precisely through access and the competent use of digital media technology that a transnational public sphere can be supported and carried. This develops the democratic potential of the internet. Linked to this is the idea that there is a need for fundamental media reform in order to fulfil the democratic requirements of a (world) society (cf. Boller/McChesney 2008). A media system which is concentrated on maximizing profit, such as the system established in the USA, fulfils

neither the ideas of a free market system nor the right for information suitable for all population groups. Thus, a central question is whether digitally supported, popular agency can be so strong that it can contribute to overcoming the existing media system, as asked by the media reformer Robert McChesney (cf. *ibid.*: 63). Through its technical possibilities, the internet offers radical ways of producing, distributing, and organizing the media, which links to the experimental politics of alternative press, free radio, and other forms of active media. So Langston establishes:

Electronic communication media have unique capacities to create democratic, participatory realms in cyberspace devoted to information and debates. Electronically mediated participation has created conditions for the emergence of new kinds of highly fluid “mobilizing structures” that tend to be far less structured, with fluid networks that are more open and participatory, and are articulated across a wide variety of issues. (Langston 2005: 44)

The significance of alternative or radical media and the perspectives which they articulate can only be understood in the social and cultural contexts to which they answer and in which they are produced and received. Alternative media opposes the products of dominant or central media because it expresses different perceptions, for example when it tries to initiate social and cultural change. Its organization and way of operation do not generally follow capitalistic business models. Thus, for example, fanzines produced by (young) fans – like fan practices in general – are not for profit, but even reject this orientation explicitly (cf. Winter 2010). This of course applies also to the politically motivated media which in recent discussions have been described as “citizens’ media” (cf. Rodriguez 2001), because they are based on open access, volunteers, and not on profit. Moreover, they are democratically minded and they support diversity, plurality, and progressive social change.

Many activists consider the internet as a tool to manage their own open spaces which should be the basis for a better future. It is precisely, the *social web* based on web 2.0 that manages the conditions for new digital tactics, aiming at a radical democratization of knowl-

edge and the pluralization of voices, perspectives, and sources. Thus, reality is defined and framed in many ways which are new and different to the central media. Linked to this are hopes of a democratization of the developing global society, which grow stronger in the conception of a transnational public sphere.

#### 4. Outlook

Since its beginnings, Cultural Studies has made agency an important research topic in the reception and appropriation of media in different cultural and social contexts. Studies of youth subculture, of the reception of television, and of fan culture show that the use of media technology can have productive, creative, and occasionally subversive aspects. These often develop at the margins or in opposition to the dominant culture and its power structures. For example, the appropriation of a television series can at times be understood as resistance to hegemonial structures of meaning (cf. Fiske 2001), if things such as social role definitions, models of identity, or expectations of normality are subversively avoided, parodied, or rejected. For Cultural Studies, it is about every day changes of meanings, attitudes, and world orientations, about the development of the productive and creative potential of the *Lebenswelt*, about the criticism of power relationships, about the moments of self empowerment, which perhaps pass quickly, but can nevertheless be defining and influential (cf. Winter 2001).

What remains open in this rather optimistic analytics of popular culture is the question, whether and to what extent cultural and social changes follow the empowering acts of media reception in which one fights for meaning as well as pleasure and in which *Eigensinn* develops. These changes go beyond the moment of reception and appropriation. The creative everyday practices dealing with the media can, in effect, confine themselves to helping the doer better orient themselves or bear more easily the banality of everyday life by temporarily distancing themselves from restricting expectations, by abstaining tactically from power structures, or by seizing small escapes.

On the other hand, alternative or radical media (cf. Downing et al. 2001) among which we count the media of protest groups, activists, social movements, subcultures, and sometimes fans and hobbyists, can be understood from the outset as “channels of resistance”, which ex-



plicity, deliberately, and with commitment question and challenge hegemonial structures in a symbolic fight for meaning (cf. Hebdige 1979, Kellner 1995, Atton 2004). They are neither subject to the laws of the market nor dependent on the state. They operate in the field of a (transnational) civil society which is building itself. Nick Couldry (2000) points to the fact that alternative media allows a "community of citizens" to engage in a democratic practice based on dialogue, with far reaching control over symbolic resources and representation of reality as well as openness.

Therefore, in the field of Cultural Studies a new research subject is revealed, that, on the one hand, examines digital media cultures within social movements and alternative communities, and, on the other hand, researches how they are created and expressed only through communications in communities and movements (cf. Atton 2004: 3ff.). In the sense of James Carey (1989), a founder of American Cultural Studies, communication is understood as culture and culture as communication.

The radical democratic hopes which are linked to the internet, rely on the fact that the global communication net is becoming more closely knit. At the center of future research stands the question as to what extent can digital technology contribute to the formation and stabilization of a transnational public sphere which crosses borders of space and time (cf. Fraser 2007). This is a public sphere in which all individuals and groups can participate across the world. Will the transnational public sphere make the democratic world society possible? To answer these questions, complex and multifaceted associations of people, digital media technology, and technological forms of life must be researched differently. Only then can we discover, if the (newly) arising forms of agency can contribute to a (radical) democratization of social life.

Translated by Andrew Terrington

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