

(<http://www.trace.ntu.ac.uk/frame/text/lovink.html>)

Presentation at the forum event of 'Code Red'  
The Performance Space, Sydney, November 23, 1997  
"Erkenne die Lage" (Gottfried Benn)

### Strategies for Media Activism

It is my personal commitment to combine cyber pragmatism and media activism with pleasurable forms of European nihilism. Not the apocalyptic, conservative culture of complaint which post modernism has left behind, but short heroic epics on the everyday life of the media, reporting from within the belly of the Beast, fully aware of its own futile existence, compared to the millennial powers to be. We aren't salespeople, trying to sell the award winning model amongst the digital cities, some exotic Amsterdam blend of old and new media or yet another disastrous set of ideas, made in Europe. Instead, we are trying to exchange models, arguments and experiences on how to organise our cultural and political activities, finance media projects and create informal networks of trust that will make life in this Babylon bearable.

New media is a dirty business, full of traps and seductive offers to work for 'the other side'. There are no ways to keep your hands clean. The computer is a deadly machine when it comes to inclusion and exclusion. We, the workers on the conceptual forefront of cyberculture, have to admit that we are (not yet) politically correct and have failed so far to pass the PC-test. This is not because these criteria are deliberately neglected, but because the passions lie elsewhere. For the time being, the struggle is about the definition of the terms under which the 'information society' will become operational. The 'Short Summer of the Internet', now rushing to its close, is about the production of cultural and political concepts, which may, or may not, be implemented on a much larger scale. What network architecture will be used? Do we accept the dominant software and screen design or do we look for alternatives? Is there still space for theory and reflection, meaningless playing around? Is the production stress overruling creativity? Later on we will find current concepts back as 3D-animation, javascripts or human-machine interfaces. The terminal workers, producing one demo after another (as Peter Lunenfeld has recently described it) are determining future formats of the new media which will shortly become standards, ready to be commodified. A further growth of new media products may need a phase of consolidation on the level of marketable products. The 'digital revolution' could therefore soon reach its counter-revolution, the Digital Thermidor (let us all hope that it will not turn violent against its Wired-visionaries that once so passionately preached their 'Californian ideologies'). There is less and less reason to make fun of the 'Dinosaur behaviour' of the apparently outdated and 'tired' multinational corporations. Restructuring programs are in place now. The CEOs have listened carefully to the cyber-libertarian visionaries and have drawn their own

conclusions. The network economy is well under way - and so is the 'Long Crisis'. Kevin Kelly's saga of the 'Long Boom' (in Wired magazine) turned out to be a hilarious mistake in the light of the current Asian (now global) currency crisis and its simultaneous environmental disaster. But sure he will keep on insisting that we simply have to route around the problems. Economics are benevolent if you are on a religious mission. As John Perry Barlow once said about the Internet, connecting every synapse with any other synapse in the world: "It is not a good thing or bad thing, but it is a holy thing." And believers can ignore any crisis, as long as it not theirs.  
"Holding the Negative." (Andre Simon)

The political economy of new media is not a favourite topic on conferences that deal with art and technology. Dry economic facts about the upcoming take-over of this emerging branch may spoil the celebration of the Computer-Aided-Renaissance. The belief that many small Davids can beat a few big Goliaths is still around. The ideology of economic liberalism has entered the rational of the creative part of the virtual class in a deep, unconscious way. The same can be said of state officials who still hold powerful positions in financing new media projects. But the fact is that the gold rush is over. Prices of web-design have fallen sharply. We can see the rise of the html-slaves, employed without contracts or health insurance, producing code for little or no money. Small businesses disappear, not only ISPs but also in the art and design sector. On the macro-economic level we have witnessed an unprecedented series of mergers in the telecommunication and media sector. This has led, for example, to the near monopoly position of WorldCom (which now owns 60% of the access business in the USA). Or take the Spanish telecom giant Telefonica and its Intranet, which will soon control the entire Spanish speaking world. We do not need to mention Microsoft here.

This may only be the return of the suppressed, after a period of post-modern comfort, in this case late monopoly capitalism. The undermining of the promising small and decentralised 'many-to-many' ideology also comes from within the IT-sector. The development of the ultimate multi-media device, web-TV, turns out to be a classical Trojan Horse. The much hated one-to-many television, news and entertainment industries have now found a way to neutralise a potential competitor. Soon the content of web and TV will be the same. In this respect, all these push media are claiming the available bandwidth. Older features of the Net, like the news groups, with their democratic and decentralised logic, are dying out and are being replaced by monitored and edited on-line magazines and chat rooms. Internal surveillance of net-use and private e-mail is on the rise due to the introduction of intranets of buildings, companies and entire countries. Another alarming tendency may be the withdrawal from the Internet of universities and research centres that are now working with much faster and secure computer networks. This dark picture results in the question -- What elements of the glory days of net hype, dating back to the period of 1989-1992, remain? Perhaps the answer is the phrase "On

the Internet no one knows you are a dog." Indeed, and no one cares: a tragic end of the once so liberating politics of identity. What counts now are the commercial use of avatars, the number of hits on a site ("2 million a day"), the rise of webvertisement and the final putting into place of electronic commerce.

What form of organisation could media activism take? While some truly discouraging stories from the economic forefront are on the rise, it is good to keep returning to the old question: "What is to be done?" A return of negative thinking could play an important role in the development of strategies for media activism. There is plenty of good will, and ruthless cynicism. What lacks is playful negativism, a nihilism on the run, never self-satisfied. Not just nomadic as a Lebensphilosophie, but rather tactical, an ever changing strategy of building infrastructures and leaving them, when the time has come, and move onwards. The explorations into the fields of the negative not only imply hampering the evil forces of global corporate capitalism, but also formulating a critique of the dominant alternative formula: the Non Governmental Organisation. The NGO is not just a model for aid organisations that have to correct the lack of government policies. It is today's one and only option to change society: open up an office, start fund-raising, lease a xerox-machine, send out faxes... and there you have your customised insurrection. "How to make the most of your rebellion." The professionalism inside the office culture of these networked organisations is the only model of media-related politics if we want to have a (positive) impact, or "make a difference." (as the ads once called it). We will soon have to reject this bureaucratic and ritualised media model altogether, with its hierarchies, management models, its so-called efficiency. "The Revolution will not be Organised." These are not the words of some chaotic anarcho-punkers or eco-ravers, calling for spontaneous revolt, right now, tonight. The crisis of the Organisation is our 'condition humaine' in this outgoing media age. And it may as well be the starting point for a new, open conspiracy that is ready to anticipate on the very near cyber-future. Not anymore as a Party or Movement, nor as a network of offices (with or without headquarter), new forms of organisation may be highly invisible, not anymore focussed on institutionalization. These small and informal communities easily fall apart and regroup in order to prevent the group from being fixed to a certain identity.

"The site less visited."

Media activism nowadays is not about the expression of truth or a higher goal. It is about the art of getting access (to buildings, networks, resources), hacking the power and withdrawing at the right moment. The current political and social conflicts are way too fluid and complex to be dealt with in such one-dimension models like propaganda, "publicity" or "edutainment." It is not sufficient to just put your information out on a home-page, produce a video or pamphlet etc. and then just wait until something happens. The potential power of mass media has successfully been crippled. Today, reproduction alone is meaningless. Most likely, tactical data are replicating themselves as viruses. Programmed as highly

resistant, long lasting memes, the new ideas are being constructed to weaken global capitalism in the long term. No apocalyptic or revolutionary expectations here, despite all rumours of an upcoming Big Crash of the financial markets. Unlike the Russian communist world empire, 'casino capitalism' (Robert Kurz) will not just disappear overnight. Heaps of deprivation and alienation is ahead of us. But this should not be the reason to lay back and become console socialists. We need organisations of our time, like the global labour union of digital artisans, networks of travellers, mailing list-movements, a gift economy of public content. These are all conceptual art pieces to start with, realised on the spot, somewhere, for no particular reason, lacking global ambition. These models will not be envisioned by this or that Hakim Bey. They are lived experiences, before they become myths, ready to be mediated and transformed on their journey through time.

Media activism constantly mediates between the real and the virtual, switches back and forth, unwilling to choose sides for the local or the global. Tactical media are creating temporary hybrids of old school political data and the aesthetics of new media, which deals with interactivity and interface design (see the article by David Garcia and me in *nettime/ZKP4*). As a next step, this is being implemented on both the level of the social personal level where our wetware bodies meet, and that of the 'non-located' technical network architecture. Activists are developing now 'negative software', (anti-)racism search engines, (temporary) public terminals, free groupware, anti-aesthetic browsers against both Microsoft and Netscape, electronic parasites that live on corporate software and content.

Recording is not enough. Reality.net, equipped with tons of web cams can be fortunate and collect evidence, but it can as well add to the spreading paranoia about the surveillance by the Corporation-State. Sometimes it may be appropriate to detect and delete camera's. Neither eco-fundamentalist nor techno-utopian, media activists are taking risks and acting freely. This may sometimes be in a criminal way, if necessary (like computer hackers), thereby ignoring legal standards (censorship, copyright). The narrow frameworks that reformists have negotiated over time, like 'privacy' and 'freedom of expression' have to be defended and practiced openly. These can only be guaranteed with the help of an independent, democratic media structure, not owned or controlled by the state. Big media corporations will be the last to defend media freedom. It would be foolish to expect anything in this respect from Murdoch, Bertelsmann or Time-Warner. The same can be said of the efforts of isolated political lobbying groups which fight for better legislation...

A 'light' and independent media infrastructure is not merely expressing diversity. It is not enough to correct the main strain media and facilitate communities with their own channels. Being a 'difference engine' on the level of representation may put out a lot of useful public content, but it does not touch on the 'media question'. What interests us most are the ideological structures which are written

into the software and architecture. But it's not enough to subvert or pervert this powerful and still mysterious structure. It is possible to continue the earlier approaches of freeware and shareware within the now hyper-commercial environment of new media. The same can be said of the efforts to develop databases of free content, a now still marginal activity that will soon gain importance once everyone has to pay for the content to download. This public sphere cannot come into being in a purely global, commercial environment and obviously also not in places where the state has absolute control over the nation's intranet and firewalls. It is in this 'third place', the public part of cyberspace, that the media activism will start to flourish.

© Geert Lovink