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The Network Society and New Forms of Engagement

The network society

The popularisation of the Internet in the 1990s resulted in the emergence of the network society. This development had a great impact on the formation of a new type of communicative relations, as networking extended also to the social sphere, where it involved an unprecedented integration of culture, politics and economy. Indeed, these domains had never been so firmly interrelated before. The mediatised network society came to experience new problems and risks stemming from the rapid development of digital technologies. On the other hand, it was able to generate and develop new tools to reappropriate these technologies for participatory, democratic and cultural activism. The phenomenon of social movements based on networked action reflects the changing patterns of social needs and expectations.

In his *Internet Galaxy* (2001), Manuel Castells observes that the gap produced by the crisis of the system of vertical economic and political organisations of the industrial era is filled by grass-roots networked social movements, whose actions change the existing reality (Castells, 2001, p. 140). In the age of the Internet, their potential stems from activating individuals to engage in co-creativity and criticism of the flaws of the system, rather than from developing structured and stable formal organisations. People can form such loose structures to act

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in defence of their rights, the values they profess or in response to a crisis situation. It is often the case that networked movements are triggered by a particular event covered in the media which sparks a strong social reaction and popular protest. It cannot remain unnoticed that networked movements are considerably different from traditional social movements. Owing to their specific nature, in most cases they do not have a formal leadership; they very often pursue a political agenda through peaceful action. Their common identity emerges as a result of a sense of togetherness, collective work on the system of values, and self-reflection. Castells stresses that collective deliberation practised in their assemblies and debates often leads to transition from outrage to hope (Castells, 2012, pp. 221–228). In spite of the *ad hoc* organisation and seemingly selective approach to the idea of common interest, their actions have a real impact on social change. Castells identifies the popularisation of the Internet as a key factor in the emergence of the new social movements:

The Internet becomes an essential medium of expression and organisation for these kinds of manifestation, which coincide in a given time and space, make their impact through the media world, and act upon institutions and organisations (business, for instance) by the repercussions of their impact on public opinion. These are movements to seize the power of the mind, not state power. (Castells, 2001, p. 141)

Insect media

Social movements are often in opposition to the existing social, political or economic system. Their discontent tends to transform into different forms of rebellion and attack against the values they criticise. Computer networks and the attendant networking of society brought important changes in military tactics: concentrated and centrally managed large-scale operations gave way to the “swarming” tactics whereby highly trained small units assemble into formations “able to concentrate on an enemy target for a small fraction of time, inflicting major damage, and dispersing again” (Castells, 2001, p. 161).

Jussi Parikka (2010) analyses how the swarm model functions in the social and political context. The attendant phenomenon of “insect media” can be observed both in politics and the media, as well as in art. An interesting example noted here is hacktivism, which – owing to its networked and pluralist nature – combines activity in all these areas. The swarm model describes a pattern of conflict on the one hand, and dispersed intelligence on the other.

As such, it has provided inspiration to numerous political activists relying on non-hierarchical control, synergy and collective action. This non-anthropomorphic intelligence – dispersed between the human and technological element – is the key to understanding the phenomenon of the contemporary networked culture (Parikka, 2010). Consequently, agency emerges as an attribute of a social collective brought together by a common goal rather than of individuals pursuing their actions on their own. Indeed, the new socio-political model is conducive to forming dynamic, fluid groups reacting to a particular event at the same time. Their intervention generates response of other members of the network, which means that the Internet is instantly flooded with particular information and particular opinions. This, in turn, has an impact on classically defined material reality. Consequently, the relation between the virtual and the material is disturbed: physical reality becomes an extension and a result of online activism.

Tony D. Sampson (2012) approaches the mechanisms of today's networked reality as a viral spread analogical to that of an epidemic. Drawing on Gabriel Tarde's model of social epidemiology, he develops a new diagram of social laws, according to which – as a result of the activity of certain groups – information, facts and events become dispersed, distorted and redirected under the impact of various factors of networked communication (Sampson, 2012). Skilful and purposeful dissemination of information is becoming one of the key forms of exerting actual impact on the geopolitical situation in different parts of the world.

If we learned political leadership and coalition building from the Russian Revolution and popular initiative from the French Revolution, the Arab revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt demonstrated the power of networks (Allagui & Quebler, 2011, pp. 1435–1436, as cited in Castells, 2012, p. 56).

Indeed, the revolts that we witness today would not have been possible without networked and “insect” organisational patterns.

Networked social movements

The early twenty-first century has been a period of abrupt socio-economic change creating new tensions at the international, national and local level. These developments result in the rise of a number of social movements which bring together people acting in defence of their rights and interests and contesting the existing order of reality. Observation of these

movements makes it possible to notice the impact of the Internet and networking on their origins, development, activity and the course of related events.

One of such cases was the Egyptian revolution of 2011. In reaction to popular protests, the government not only resorted to violent repressions against those involved, but also blocked access to the Internet, as social media were the principal means of communication between the protesters and of their self-organisation. Since in this day and age no country can function without telephony of some kind, the landlines were operational. This opportunity enabled the protesters to use a speak-to-tweet system which generated instantly published tweets. In addition, hackers from the organisation Telecomix developed a programme that made it possible to transfer telephone messages to all fax machines in Egypt (Castells, 2012, pp. 63–64). The shutdown of Internet access was not only ineffective, as the protesters remained in the streets, but also resulted a considerable loss of revenue amounting to between 3 and 4% of Egypt's annual GDP (Castells, 2012, p. 65).

A similar process of transition from indignation expressed online to protests in public space was the case of the Occupy Wall Street movement. The economic crisis and the stock market crash of 2008 raised further doubts about the capitalist economic system. Different social classes engaged in active criticism of socio-economic inequality exemplified by the situation in which a small minority of citizens owns most of the resources (hence the famous slogan "We are the 99%"). An online call to action issued by Adbusters magazine in its blog and retweeted to countless users motivated the protesters to assemble in a particular place at a particular time. On 17 September 2011 they turned up at Wall Street. Since the area had been sealed off by the police, they gathered at nearby Zuccotti Park, where they continued their protest (Adamski, 2011).

Castells (2012) observes that the new social movements are networked in multiple forms, including networks within the movement and with other media spheres. Although such initiatives often originally emerge on the Internet, their impact extends also to physical space. Movements of this kind can be both global and local at the same time: they can concern issues of relatively small communities which exemplify those of many other groups, or draw interest in other parts of the world. It was thanks to networks and the new forms of diffusion of information that the Arab Spring commanded attention among people around the globe. The events of the revolts in the region ceased to be only a local problem and became an internationally debated issue. Importantly, groups and individuals were able to become actively involved in support of the protesters.

Networked social movements generate their own form of time, “timeless time”, which involves a day-by-day experience of insecurity in a volatile situation of the present on the one hand, and the anticipation of a distant potential reality of the future on the other (Castells, 2012, pp. 221–228). One example of this pattern was Occupy Wall Street: people organised themselves in protest “here and now”, but their appeals and agenda extended into the potential, alternative time of the future.

Multiplication of the subject

The success of networked social movements indicates that the new media influenced the change of social structures and created new forms of communication. This combined impact of the media, society, politics and economy was anticipated in the late 1980s by Félix Guattari (1989/2000), who introduced the concept of a post-media era.¹ He predicted that “the digitisation of the television image [would] soon reach the point where the television screen is at the same time that of the computer and the telematic receiver” (Guattari, 1996/2013, p. 27). In this way, the separate television, telematic and information technology practices were to form a complex junction which would blur the distinction not only between the real and the virtual, but also between the subjective, biological and technological. For Guattari, this conception was important also from the perspective of his philosophical reflection on the definition of contemporary subjectivity. He saw a revolution that would merge the distinct spheres of technology and everyday life as an opportunity for the emergence of a dynamic and unfixed subject. In his studies of the schizoid personality written with Gilles Deleuze in the 1960s, he stressed the need for the multiplication of human subjectivity as a strategy that would enable the subject to position him- or herself outside the system and in opposition to it. In his view, new technologies and networked systems could intensify a conscious anti-system perception on the part of the dynamic and unfixed subject who was engaged in the political process and had potential agency:

¹ Piotr Celiński offers a different definition, in which he equates post-media with the digital aesthetics of information, an emanation of cyber software. This stems from the ability to simulate all kinds of media by a universal machine, the computer, and hence from the crisis of representation. As described, transition from meta- to post-media is a two-stage process. In the first phase, “the status and cultural power of the existing art media becomes equal. (...) The second phase involves a collapse of all these media forms into one another. Fusing together, they lose their uniqueness and, eventually, their own identity as such” (Celiński, 2013, pp. 21–22).

The emergence of these new practices of subjectivation of a post-media era will be greatly facilitated by a concerted reappropriation of communicational and information technology, assuming that they increasingly allow for: (...) the formation of innovative forms of dialogue and collective interactivity (...); the connection, through networking, of banks of data (...); the multiplication to infinity of 'existential operators,' permitting access to mutant creative universes. (Guattari, 1986/2009, pp. 299–300)

Guattari expected that the multiplication of "existential operators" was to result in the emergence of nomadic collectives which would not so much destroy the system as – by means of their practices – function as "transmitters" of opposition (Sampson, 2012) against patterns imposed from above. He interpreted this as the prospective beginning of a post-media era, one characterised by collective-individual rediscovery and an interactive use of machines of information, communication, intelligence, art and culture. According to his theory, all previous formations of power and their particular ways of shaping the world had become deterritorialised. He perceived the deterritorialising collective action as a potential form of opposition against the dominant functions and strategies of the political and economic machine (Guattari, 1986/2009). His ambivalent attitude to new technologies, which is apparent in a number of his works (e.g. *The Three Ecologies* (2000)), points at the significance of not only philosophical issues, but also political practice, where the use of digital tools can involve manipulation (control of information from above) as well as emergence of social entities. The combined effect of computer networks, miniaturisation and personalisation of technology involves the prospective development of networked social relations. The use of digital tools by minority groups in ways different than designed is a sign of transition to a post-media era, when the mass media are no longer controlled from above.

These processes can be exemplified by the case of the Electronic Disturbance Theatre (EDT), a group whose members developed the tools of "electronic civil disobedience", such as the platform called Flood Net, software used to "flood" and block an opponent's website. The artists forming the EDT were active opponents against the policy of the Mexican government towards the indigenous population of the state of Chiapas. Their activity and the use of their online tools stimulated involvement of foreign public around the world, which made this local conflict an important international issue (Wray, 1998).

Since 2008, the tactics developed by the EDT and the practice of electronic civil disobedience have been used by the now famous network called Anonymous. The collective goes back to a group of users of the 4chan portal who developed an interest in social issues

and became engaged in hacktivism, involving the so-called distributed denial-of-service (DDoS) attacks on different websites. Their most important operations include Operation DarkNet, which targeted child pornography sites and revealed the names of a considerable number of paedophiles, and Project Chanology, involving protests against Scientology (Hqanon, 2015).

Performativity in the post-media era

In the post-media era, social and media elements conjoin to form a complex assemblage whose constituent components cannot be separated. Software has an impact on society and vice versa, which makes it a case of mutual reinforcement. We live in the post-media era, when the media can be used as a tool of opposition, transforming the relations between the producer and the consumer (Guattari, 1986/2009). Networking has effectively changed communication formats, as its strategies engage the receiver and are oriented towards mutual impact. This generates a new type of experience, since even contact with remediated content involves unprecedented patterns of interaction and reception. All forms of networked activity are characterised by performativity, a category which Mieke Bal characterises as follows:

(...) performativity becomes the instance of an endless process of repetition; a repetition involving similarity and difference, and therefore relativising and enabling social change and subjects' interventions, in other words, agency. (Bal, 2002, pp. 178–179)

Using the concept of performance in the context of "execution", "accomplishment", "a presentation" or "a show", she discusses the tension between the theorised and over-exploited concept of performance and performativity, which (owing to their popularity in different fields) have drifted apart and are rarely analysed in conjunction. Since performance has become most strongly associated with an artistic stream, performance art, it is the aesthetic context that has come to the fore (Bal, 2002). This is related to an understanding of aesthetics as referring only to visual arts, hence works concerning this field do not analyse performativity in any greater detail.

According to Bal, relations between performance and performativity are mediated by memory, which functions as a bridge between individual and social life. It may become an instrument of communication for subjects who do not have enough clout. Since memory

takes place here and now, but refers to the past, the temporality of this notion is crucial. These acts of memory, but also of forgetting, re-enact and recreate what is personal into what is political. "The point of these stains, or rather the performativity of these images-without-image, is that they make you think of something, something that is culturally embedded, so that the sequence of the subsequent images will confirm or infirm this association" (Bal, 2002, p. 186). Participation in the act of memory involves a repetition of what is already known and has been embedded. Performativity hinges on renewed authenticity rather than participation in the performance alone: the viewer becomes endowed with the power of agency and, as it were, is compelled to perform the act of memory him- or herself. Another element of performativity is the inclusion of the viewers' physical state and their bodily engagement (Bal, 2002).

Engaged art

We may say that there have always been different forms of performative art which were involved in political and economic processes and engaged the audience by employing different aesthetic strategies. However, it was not until the nineteenth century that these ideas became a mass-scale phenomenon. Social change, the disintegration of the feudal hierarchy, the decay of monarchism and the industrial revolution, which was the factor behind migration of the population, opened a new field of activity of engaged art. All these developments gradually resulted in the democratisation of access to different forms of practices combining art and political action. In a number of cases artistic activity involved a shift of focus from aesthetic to performative values, and in the twentieth century political engagement became an essential element of art. Artists began to produce works and take action aiming to bring about a real social change or make critical comments on social problems. The most important examples here include actions of the Dadaists, artefacts and actions of the Futurists, and the work of avant-garde theatre directors. The most distinct conceptions of engaged theatre were developed in the 1920s and 1930s by Erwin Piscator and Bertolt Brecht, whose ideas have continued to provide inspiration for decades to come.

The popularisation of the Internet in the 1990s and the emergence of the network society reformulated the field of social relations. Although twentieth-century forms of socio-artistic practice have not disappeared, some of their elements migrated to the Web

as the result of their remediation. Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin (2000) observe that particular media do not vanish to be replaced by new ones which are entirely unrelated to their predecessors. Rather, the dominant medium is subject to the process of remediation whereby some of its attributes are preserved and other – transformed or lost (Bolter & Grusin, 2000). The media do not function in closed systems but remain under the impact of various phenomena. For example, what so far has functioned in a linear way becomes networked and hypertextual as a result of remediation by the Internet. Exploring the new realm of the Web, engaged artists began to use hacking tools and to thematise and problematise the experience of the networked collective. Such elements as a community of views and collective action make it possible to approach acts of hacktivism in terms of a modern networked social sculpture. In this perspective, it could be said that with the activity of Anonymous and other similar groups the ideas proposed by Joseph Beuys came true in the new, networked reality.

Twentieth-century engaged art developed a number of techniques of pro-social action relying on the use of subversive strategies, and successfully strived to reappropriate many areas that had been hardly accessible to artistic exploration. As never before, artistic practices became a critical tool in relation to changing reality. On the eve of transformation, they were able to test the potential and threats of the emerging social, political and economic configurations. In this context, it is hardly surprising that the rise of the network society and the tools offered by the new media have become an inspiration to many engaged artists and an object of their interest.

What needs to be noted, however, is that all subversive tactics are quickly incorporated into the centralised system of control. What was initially intended to rupture the social, economic or political system is taken over as a ready-to-use tool within it. This is also the case of networks and networked social movements. Indeed, the latter can become part of a game financed by corporate capital and come to function as a tool of centralised political power.

Conclusion

What is apparent from these observations is a move from institutionalised art, one stemming from the aesthetic paradigm, to performative, engaged art organised by grass-roots initiatives and focused on social issues. Another field of expansion of this new art is the Internet. Theatre was taken to the streets and discovered new forms

of performativity. Today, what is public can move to the Web to foster dissemination of ideas and expansion of activism. What happens in one place can be instantly transmitted worldwide in real time, widely analysed and commented on around the globe. Under the circumstances, the emerging forms remediate the old, traditional strategies of engaged art. One of such examples is the above presented case of conceptual hacktivist attacks performed by the Electronic Disturbance Theatre, or operations conducted by the Anonymous movement.

Performative engagement means co-creation, co-feeling, achieving and extracting, and performativity is a cultural force that has an impact on the lives of individuals, which makes it one of the most important strategies of engagement in the networked society. In this perspective, a number of different aspects of networked activity – including subversive and hacktivist strategies used in art – are profoundly performative in their nature. Perhaps it is because of its extraordinary performative potential that the network, along with the new forms of communication, has become a source of new tools in the domain of both art and social involvement. Performative use of the network certainly contributed to the emergence and consolidation of revolutionary movements and facilitated social change which we can witness today. Although traditions of subversive reappropriation of tools go back to the twentieth century, it is only with the networking of society that this kind of activity became a global phenomenon.

Translated by Piotr Styk

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The Network Society and New Forms of Engagement

The popularisation of the Internet in the 1990s marked the beginning of socio-cultural changes leading to the emergence of the network society. Networking extended to many spheres, such as social, cultural, political and economic, and the attendant social changes brought new problems and risks associated with new technologies. This resulted in the rise of networked social movements, which reappropriated technological tools by means of subversive strategies using an insect-type attack based on the structure of the swarm. One form of such an attack involves subversive hacktivist actions of a deeply performative character. Perhaps it is because of its extraordinary performative potential that the network, along with the new ways of communication, has become a source of acquiring tools both in the artistic and social field.

Keywords:

network society, technology, engaged art, subversive tactics, performativity, insect media

Społeczeństwo sieci a nowe formy zaangażowania

Spopularyzowanie w latach 90. ubiegłego wieku internetu zapoczątkowało przemiany społeczno-kulturowe, które doprowadziły do powstania społeczeństwa sieciowego. Usieciowienie objęło wiele sfer – społeczną, kulturową, polityczną i ekonomiczną. Wraz ze zmianami społecznymi pojawiły się nieznane dotąd problemy i zagrożenia związane z nowymi technologiami. Spowodowało to powstanie usieciowionych ruchów społecznych, które w subwersywny sposób zaczęły odzyskiwać narzędzia technologiczne, posługując się insektalnym rodzajem ataku, opartym o strukturę roju. Jedną z form takiego ataku są subwersywne działania hacktywistyczne, o głęboko performatywnym charakterze. Być może właśnie z powodu niezwykłego potencjału performatywnego sieć, wraz z nowymi sposobami komunikacji, stała się źródłem pozyskiwania narzędzi zarówno na polu artystycznym, jak i społecznym.

Słowa kluczowe:

społeczeństwo sieci, technologia, sztuka zaangażowana, taktyki subwersywne, performatywność, media insektalne

Note:

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