

C O U N T E R A I D E M

*An essay on Independent Media*¹

In the forthcoming essay I intend to present my view on the relationship of reality and media focusing on the role of alternative media and its perspective towards social change. I am based in cultural anthropology and my point of departure is a form of McLuhanism (medium theory)² and the sociology of knowledge as outlined by Luckmann³. Initially the position of mass media shall be dealt with in within the structure of capitalist society, while the next section shall unfurl the stance taken by autonomous media activity from a dialectic relationship with former⁴. Ultimately some practical strategic moves shall be presented in a more empirical flavour. The final statement shall address the present perspectives of the movement with regards to the future. At some point or another excurses are possible to asses various texts of relevance from the reading list which accompanied the exam questions.⁵

MASS MEDIA

The role of mass media in contemporary urban societies is the supplement of the consensual experience which is lacking in a historical point of extreme individualism and general alienation.⁶ The sheer number of people living in the urban landscape disables man to perceive the multitude around her as a community, in face of the fact that a sense of unity and a pool of common experience to serve as the basis of communication is essential for the operative reproduction of society. The brakedown

1 The author is the activist of Indymedia Hungary. Last week he was in Geneva attending the United Nations conference 'World Summit on Information Society', or more precisely its counterconference, the event entitled 'WSIS? We Seize!'. www.wsis.org vs. www.geneva03.org

2 McLuhan, Marshall. *Understanding Media*. London: Routledge, 1964. See also Excurse 1.

3 Luckmann, Thomas & Berger, Peter. *The Social Construction of Reality - A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge*. USA: Penguin, 1966.

4 „Az emberek azonban nem tudják érvényesíteni azt, ami nem hozzáférhető. A kultúra nem csak a konform életmód mintáit kultiválja. Amit a kultúra leginkább helyesel, az lesz egyben a jelekben megjelenő tiltakozás vagy provokáció legvalószínűbb célpontja is.” -- Gerbner, George. "A kulturális mutatók". In: Horányi Ö. (ed.), *Kommunikáció*. Budapest: Közgazdasági és Jogi, 1997: I. , 267-280.

5 See Excurse 2.

6 „A média vált ezáltal a társadalmi tapasztalat legfőbb forrásává és csomópontjává, a társadalmi valóság definiálásának elsődleges területévé.” -- Kitzinger Dávid. „A morális pánik elmélete”. *Replika* 40 (2000): 23-49. Further thanks for the word 'consensual' which is witty indeed and I haven't encountered it before.

of large-scale mediation would lead to anarchy and apocalypse. Such a state of affairs is often represented by way of the metaphor of the cog working in a machine it has no means of comprehending, thereby losing its sense of functionality and its claim to be an individual in a system is therefore challenged⁷. A prime example are the puppet films of the Quay Brothers. In those films the extreme vulnerability of the individual is surfaced when finding itself face to face with the system of which the workings are so obscure that literally no one has grasp on it. The very existence of the discipline of sociology and the thin insubstantiality of the texts in the curriculum provide evidence of the reality of such arguments.⁸ This is not to say that mass media would be an alien power to take over the people, not at all. Mass media caters for the functionality of the establishment, and as far as that is concerned, for the individuals that are involved.

Having defined the general role that mass media plays it is necessary to investigate further into the actual characteristics of its operation. Television is singled out for that purpose with a note that most notions described in view of the the TV screen are applicable to all mass media from radio to major 'Net portals⁹. There are three layers of properties that shall be examined in respect to the analysis of a medium: physical, logical and content¹⁰. Naturally these aspects are entangled with themselves and the social reality which they define and are defined by.¹¹

On the physical layer it is clear and nauseatingly overstated that television provides a one-way flow of information.¹² It is plain to see that the infrastructure for broadcasting and transmission is owned by the capital or state. It turns out that the very air which surrounds us as a natural resource and needs no transformation for consumption is denied of the individual when it comes to broadcasting, a fact that

7 Marx, Karl & Engels, Frederick. *Manifesto of the Communist Party*. London: Communist League, 1848.

8 Most of the texts in the curriculum seem to be published in an abridged format, full of [...] and similar marx of ectromelia.

9 Major 'Net portals are www.google.com and www.cnn.com and even www.wired.com, etc.

10 Benkler, Yochai. *Open Spectrum – Building the Commons in Physical Architecture*. New York: New York University School of Law, 2002. PDF file. www.newamerica.net/Download_Docs/pdfs/Doc_File_122_1.pdf

11 For instance, on the physical layer anyone with minimum resources could broadcast radio. However, legislation on the logical level denies that right.

12 McQuail, Denis. *Mass Communication Theory, 3rd ed.*, London: Sage, 1994.

leads on to the logical level of protocols and legislation.¹³ At the content level, the message determined by the medium is a message of hierarchy and centralised discourse setting. Intentionally or unintentionally (depending on the extent of paranoia), mass media promotes, reproduces and represents the logic of neoliberal capitalism.¹⁴ The commodification of culture and values in general is one inherent aspect of social reality. However, it is the one and only aspect which mass media represents, and to follow Deleuze here only what is represented is real. As the prime tool of the reproduction of consensual reality mass media is an answer to the 'control crisis' which arose for the second time, but in connection with the growing speed of the production and dissemination of deviant ideas (and ideologies) which the postcapitalist system has spawned by itself.¹⁵

At this point the perspective of social change comes in. Mass media represents collective experience as far as it is open for commodification. Therefore focal points of malfunction in the system are either represented solely within the borders of a fictional ontology (the scape of the aesthetic) or not at all.¹⁶ Once again, man becomes a mere spectator of his own life.

INDEPENDENT MEDIA¹⁷

The role of independent media in the aforementioned structure is largely defined by the deficiencies of the system, namely and mainly the absence of the social experience as such from the production and consumption of mediated experience and henceforth consensual reality.¹⁸ In this respect the mission of independent media is not to serve as the voice (image, etc.) of the people but to return the power of representation and

13 United Nations & International Telecommunication Union. *Declaration of Principles - Building the Information Society: a global challenge in the new Millennium*. Geneva: www.wsis.org, 2003.

14 Costanza-Chock, Sasha. „WSIS, the Neoliberal Agenda and Counter-proposals from 'Civil Society'.” *Greenpepper Winter 03*. (2003): 6-10.

15 Hirsch, Eric. „New Technologies and Domestic Consumption”. In: Marris & Thornham (eds.) *Media Studies*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1996: 816-34.

16 „He comes to mistake knowing about problems for doing something about them. His social conscience remains spotlessly clear. He is concerned. He is informed [emphasis by me].” -- Lazarsfeld & Merton „Mass Communication, Popular Taste and organized social action”. In: Marris - Thornham (eds.) *Media Studies*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1996: 18-30.

17 Interestingly, all that can be said about independent media here applies all the same to subcultures in general, which is possibly a hint why the Revolution is impossible.

18 Mehta, Vickram Krishna Arun. „Of Chickens and Rotten Eggs.” *Greenpepper Winter 03*. (2003): 34-37.

agenda-setting into their own hands.¹⁹ Naturally - and that is even so in traditional cultures - this can be achieved through direct or indirect means. The former would be that all members of society (including the excluded) have access to the material and immaterial means of the production of meaning, while the latter would be a more mediated method taking advantage of specialists who are however not full-time professionals and are embedded in the society. The practice of independent media presents a scenario that oscillates between those two resolutions: individuals in one way or another acquire the means and go professional themselves, acting according to the logic of 'grassroots' movements. The embeddedness of these actors remedies not only the problem of the imbalance in the communication circuit, but also the problem of the repression of social problems into the fictitious sphere. Independent media is a form of activism in itself, and on condition it succeeds to create a discourse of social change that is relevant indeed to the given community, then the people taking part in the discourse have the possibility and motivation to move into direct action. Independent media strikes a balance between the mediation of experience and direct personal action.

As far as the particulars are concerned, there are two well-established media that have both the physical and logical structure to support such use. One is the camcorder and the other is the 'Net. However, this is not to say that they are 'free media'. The physical infrastructure that enables them is clearly in the hands of mass media producers (like Sony or Oracle), as well as the logical patterns that drive them such as standards of storage and compression or licences and patents. What makes them especially suitable to establish a so-called countermedia for the counter-culture, is the structure of participation they implement. That sole factor is the key for the operation of independent media, and the first step towards autonomous media.²⁰

Given that requirement, it is only a question of time and creativity until any media can surely be hacked used for autonomous media purposes. Pirate radio and television are pulling input from 'Net audiovisual streams and shooting the waves through hacked satellites into the homes of anyone with a satellite dish (a common sight even in the regions of extreme poverty like Afghanistan). The simple fact that all

19 Jeremijenko, Natalie. „Arming the Citizenry – Experiments in the Demilitarisation of technology.” *Greenpepper* Winter 03. (2003): 44-47.

20 Rich, Kate. „BIT Radio.” *Greenpepper* Winter 03. (2003): 37-38.

media targets people ensures that hackers have access to one side of the device at worst. McLuhan was right in that the inherent qualities of the medium determine the message, but he seldom thought about the power of the knowledge inverting the invention. Reverse engineering is a term commonly used for the task of taking apart a machine to find out how it works, and putting it all together to suit the hacker's own needs, but its theoretical relevance is also crucial. One prime example is the hacking of advertising ('détournement') as practised by the late activists of the Situationist International and the contemporary Adbusters.

FURTHER EXAMPLES

All examples are based on an emerging structure of organisation: a non-hierarchical horizontal model that enables the participation factor stressed above. Such a form of production first triumphed on the field of software, with the introduction of Open Source and Free Software on the physical level, and copyleft principles implemented in the GPL and Creative Commons licences on the logical layer. Open Source simply leaves the potential for further development by end-users at the end of the production line, which therefore challenges the very idea of an end of the production line; one reason why are the best software in the world are developed according to these principles of participation.

On the other hand, media hacking needs not be so large in format. The Anti-Terrorist Line is the hack of BIT Labs of the Terrorist Lines which were set up by the United States government. TLs are installed to collect anonymous information from civil delators and informers that are collected in a secret database accessible only for armed forces to capture suspected 'terrorists'. In contrast, the ATL stores entries of official civil harassment connected with the 'fight against terrorism' in an open database accessible for anyone with 'Net connection. Stephen Shukaitis describes how the hacked anonymous espionage system restores the lost sense of community:

"Whilst both systems are publicly writable, only the anti-terror line is publicly readable. The cumulative effect of this openness is significant - it allows the anti-terror line to be publicly interpretable and reusable by many people in many different

situations. This may amount to nothing, but the probability of the anti-terror files being used for many purposes - a documentary radio show, a classroom lecture, a remix into an ambient track - is much higher than for the evidence collected by the terror line. Although both systems require participation, only the anti-terror line is actually participatory."²¹

Such and similar hacks can be performed on anything that one can put one's finger on: I have seen the structure of Free Software applied to catering, housing, education, the encyclopedia etc.²²

CONCLUSION

Independent media is countermedia: it utilises structures and practices that are operational under the neoliberal system.²³ Nonetheless, these structures avoid entering the logic of capitalism and remain exterior to it. Therefore, they have the power to restore the lost sense of community even on an international scale, and serve as platforms for the representation of unpreferred discourses, initiating social change in a world that becomes more and more static however it speeds into the future.²⁴ Albeit their poor impact on contemporary urban societies, they do not fail to deliver local resolutions and shall grow in significance with the media that serves as the prototype of their organisation: the 'Net. O

maxigas @ 2003.12.19 20:22

²¹ Jeremijenko, Natalie. „Arming the Citizenry – Experiments in the Demilitarisation of technology.” *Greenpepper* Winter 03. (2003): 44-47.

²² Links to related projects respectively: www.yomango.net; www.squat.net; www.wikipedia.org.

²³ maxigas, „Genf03.” Budapest: *Indymedia.hu*, 2003.12.20.

²⁴ Lovink, Geert & Schneider, Florian. „Reverse Engineering Freedom.” *Makeworld paper#3*, (2003): 15-16.

B I B L I O Y H Ő A R A Ő

Benkler, Yochai. *Open Spectrum – Building the Commons in Physical Architecture*. New York: New York University School of Law, 2002. PDF file. www.newamerica.net/Download_Docs/pdfs/Doc_File_122_1.pdf

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United Nations & International Telecommunication Union. Declaration of Principles - Building the Information Society: a global challenge in the new Millennium. Geneva: www.wsis.org, 2003. O

Excuse .†

Excuse one is a true curse: my condemnation of Lazarsfeld & Merton from the McLuhanist stance I take towards media sociology.

Lazarsfeld & Merton „Mass Communication, Popular Taste and organized social action”. In: Marris - Thornham (eds.) *Media Studies*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1996.

“As was indicated a moment ago, we cannot resort to experiment by comparing contemporary American society with and without mass media. But, however tentatively, we can compare their social effects with, say, that of the automobile. [..]”

A sole paragraph of the text indicates clearly that the authors lack both the fundamental power of imagination and the essential knowledge of the field, a gross description that can be applied to vastly all the texts I encountered on the reading list. The father of media studies, Marshal McLuhan in his influential - albeit seemingly scarcely read - book, 'Understanding Media - The Extensions of Man', describes the idea of the 'medium', as taking its root in the word for 'mediation' or 'transaction'. Anyone that has got as long as the introduction will now that the automobile is just as a medium as the light, or say, television. The automobile enhances our perception by moving people around via the medium of the road, while the television moves but images via the medium of the satellite, etc. Media can pool into each other so that the vastest medium we can perceive is the very Time Heidegger calls Being.

By the way, in 1967 HardWired published a collaboration between McLuhan and visual artist Quentin Fiore, which lends two entire pages to the visual extension of the one sentence: "The wheel... ..is an extension of the foot."

McLuhan, Marshall & Fiore, Quentin (1967). *The Medium is the Massage - An Inventory of Effects*. Produced by Jerome Agel. Hardwired, San Francisco.

Excuse .S

In Excuse 2. I attempt an update on the literature commenting on the emergence of blogging (e.g.). All that performed from a notably post-modern platform.

Lazarsfeld & Merton „Mass Communication, Popular Taste and organized social action”. In: Marris - Thornham (eds.) *Media Studies*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1996.

“We have something to learn in this connection from Malinowski's observations among his beloved Trobriand Islanders. There, he reports, no organised social action is taken with respect to behaviour deviant from a social norm unless there is _public_ announcement of the deviation. [...] But once the behavioural deviations are made simultanously public for all, this sets in train tensions between the 'privately tolerable' and the 'publicly acknowledged'. [...] Publicity closes the gap between 'private attitudess' and 'public morality'.”

With the emergence of the 'Net (e.g. blogging) and surveillance technology, the public and the private sphere seem to collide more and more into each other, although the fact that such an event is repeatedly taken up as an issue signals that it is still a borderline case, albeit not scarce. Interestingly the same argument stands for the real and the virtual, for precisely the same reason and with the same note to be made.

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McQuail, Denis. *Mass Communication Theory*, 3rd ed., London: Sage, 1994: 29.

On page 29. McQuail writes about the 'public sphere', just after outlining his rather conservative view on postmodernism. A more radical approach is taken here:

With the emergence of privatisation and globalisation it can be argued that the 'public sphere' as such has diminished. However, the rise of the 'Net and autonomous media are places which renew and further the function of the 'public sphere', transforming it into a 'creative commons'²⁵, a novel setup which surpasses the concept of mandatory media and mandatory democracy to establish a space based on autonomous media and direct democracy.

²⁵ See www.creativecommons.org.