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Hactivism

Street protests, politics, and mobility: A study of activist uses of syndication

Rather than the presidential elections, perceived by many American activists as a defeat forecasted in the absence of any credible challenger to George Bush, it was the protest movement against the Republican National Convention in New York in August 2004 ("A31-RNC") that more likely crystallized the political, technical, and artistic innovation potential that came to the fore during the whole American election campaign.

A31 as an urban electronic resistance fest

A31, to borrow the Critical Arts Ensemble's words, was truly an "electronic resistance" fest at the level of a whole city. For four days, in a place that had practically been put under a state of siege, New York's streets were transformed into a vast testing ground of "tactical media", mobilizing a variegated range of sometimes very unexpected actions. It is beyond the to-be-expected displays of the "street-theatre" of the so-called "reality", perfunctory performances whose subversive potential fatally ends up being absorbed by "cultural consecration", that one probably has to look for political innovation and the true insurrection of meaning, that is: in the new forms of electronic resistance.

A31 is foremost one of the first instances where street protest meets the new media activists, up to that moment cosily sheltered in the "temporary autonomous zones" offered to them by the world of contemporary art, big corporate and public entities, or prestigious American engineering schools. In the same way as in Genua, the "flagship device" was the hand-held video camera, which marked a turning point in media activism; the cellular phone, with its built-in image recorder is what will be remembered as emblematic of those four days. After a period of being ignored, not to say shunned, by media activists, the cellular phone, and beyond it, the whole gamut of issues around mobility, made then and there their entry on the "hactivist" scene. Yet another illustration, if needed, of standard theories of innovation confounding principle, phrased by William Gibson in the novel *Neuromancer*: "The street finds its own use for things."

Taking its cue from mobilization practices linked to the *Flash/Smart Mobs* phenomenon,¹ the *Txtmob* project,² initiated by the activist group *Institute for Applied Autonomy*³ during the two Democratic and Republican national conventions, is a perfect example of this reappropriation of the cellular phone by social movements. Its *modus operandi* is very simple: in order to get a direct information feed by SMS, it suffices to register on a subscriber list. This format was used the duration of both conventions as carrier of real-time

information about the police's moves, the place and time of new actions, and the coordination of medical and legal help for the demonstrators. Conversely, *Moport*⁴ is a web interface that was developed by another group of activists, and that was put to test during the RNC in New York City. Here, what counted was not so much spreading information among demonstrators as getting it in real time on the internet. It operated as a mail-drop service for activists to upload pictures and video footage they had captured on their cell phones,⁵ which were then directly put online. One should add that a number of activists also used *Flickr*, a free picture-archiving service, by opening a dedicated folder and using "RNC" as "tag".⁶

However, one should be careful here, and ponder whether this does not merely represent the latest fad in gadgetry among tech-savvy activists, or even if these experiments do not, once again, play the game of the big corporates (especially telecoms) by enabling them to find out about new usages at a low cost.

And yet, while it is true that such tendencies are there — sometimes even at a conscious, not to say instrumental level — we still think it necessary to enquire whether we are not witnessing an important turning point in and a renewal of "hacktivist" media usage through these practices, especially in the ones related to mobility. To put it a bit simply, one could state that activist usage of cell phones is in the process of closing that "impossible" synergy loop between information circulating networks and the action on the street. In a certain way, these two "worlds" had their own separate territories and modes of action ("viral" transmission of information vs. demos and direct action) and tended to ignore each other. But through these mobility-based practices, (cell phone) "hacktivism" wants to appropriate the street as well, and strives to inscribe, both literally and metaphorically, its action in the public space of the city — as we will see next. *Bikes against Bush* is exemplary in this regard. Based on the graffiti-spraying machine "StreetWriter" — a computer-steered device moving either on its own or pulled by a car — developed by the Institute for Applied Autonomy,⁷ Joshua King, a technology student at the Parsons School of Design in New York, extended this concept onto his mountain bike, connecting his laptop to the internet through his cell phone. By going to his website,⁸ anybody could send a message to be immediately sprayed on the road surface as the biker was cruising New York's streets.

The street — cyberspace convergence

These innovative activist practices aiming at reappropriating the street as a space of action and protest based on cell phones, and wireless internet connectivity (WiFi) also paired up with another technology, usually associated with the "blogosphere" (the world of weblogs): content syndication. A simple illustration of such syndication practices is provided by *RNC Redux/Remix Open Doc*,⁹ developed by the *Screensaversgroup* and *The Thing*, in cooperation with New York IMC (Indymedia), Free Speech TV, Moport, and others. This initiative is based on a very simple idea: scoop up all contents, whether sound, pictures, texts, or videos on the net, regardless of origin: blog (including audio/video), info site, cell phone or mail messaging (eg AIM), and so on; rearrange and redistribute them on the net or beam them on the streets or various other venues in New York. Thus the Moport-posted SMSs we described earlier were ported to this format.

Seen from the traditional viewpoint of information theory, the result of such efforts does not appear to be very "orthodox". Thus, the videos that were distributed this way did not conform to the rhetorical and dramatic canons of

the classic audio–visual media, but were putting together, with no apparent order, pictures, sounds, and words surging both from the net and out of the streets. The main interest of these productions resides in their destabilizing of the accepted "truth" format of the traditional media, which is based on a whole series of preconceived parameters with regard to the status of the spokespersons, the content of statements, and the way they were uttered — in one word, the "mythology of the modern glance" as described by Félix Guattari.¹⁰ Hence, the "mediatic objects" produced and distributed by *RNC Redux* were not intended to master and impose in an authoritarian fashion their own narrative structure, but wanted to plunge the spectator into an aesthetics of confusion, "merging and reassembling fragmentary images, leaving their meaning to roam freely in the grid of possibilities".¹¹ As an emblematic example of the sort of video practices that the Critical Art Ensemble had wished for, this particular performance tried to constitute itself as a collective agency and to be the projection of various perceptive universes as they sprung up from the movement itself, shorn of any attempt to produce an interpretative matrix beforehand, in order to allow the spectator the liberty of creating his own inferences.

It should perhaps be added that the *Screensaversgroup*, in shaping these "mediatic objects", used an application called *Keyworx*.¹² A true post–media machine, *Keyworx* is a multimedia and multi–user software suite that enables one to port, synchronize, and disseminate multimedia contents in real time.¹³

A mediascape weaved in the threads of syndication

Beyond the video post–media practices within what we have described, borrowing a concept of Arjun Appadurai, as "activist mediascape" in an article titled "Become the Media! From Postmedia to Mediascape",¹⁴ the increasingly systematic use the media activist scene is making of content syndication and aggregation technologies represents for us a possibly decisive political evolution of networked activism. Having analyzed a rather large stockpile of activist videos put online over the past five years (ca. 2000 in all), we noticed that one of the shortcomings this activist audio–visual production, which was impeding its "common becoming",¹⁵ to borrow a phrase from Michael Hardt and Toni Negri, was their dispersion all over the network. But what could be seen as a failure may also be the very strength of this method of production, as all theses that separate creative spaces, wary of any attempt to centralize information and its spread, are jealously protecting their own autonomy.

So how to safeguard this space of autonomy, where failure means the risk of every creative endeavour falling victim to the enticing sirens of institutionalization? And all this while keeping within the bounds of a common undertaking, which, as everyone will admit, is the condition of political success? How to — borrowing here from Michel de Certeau's categories¹⁶ — carve out one's own territory in order to engage an action that is not merely tactical, and that does not merely react to each and every move of the adversary, but attacks him on his own ground?

We certainly do not want to suggest here that there could be some sort of "killer application" that necessarily and automatically would address this rather fundamental political question, but only to point out certain lines of operation being pursued by today's networked activists. We think that content syndication is definitely one of those, and one that is calling for a systematic effort at political and sociological understanding. In the wake of the spread of the "blog phenomenon" and other content management systems such as WiKis,

PhpNuke, Spip, and so on, the majority of (media) activist platforms offers "syndication" these days, by making the rss feed of their site available. This enables information published on one website to be shown automatically on another website. Thus, without relinquishing one's own aesthetic, political, or editorial autonomy, and more importantly, without the need of a fastidious effort to identify and put other websites' contents on line, it becomes possible to establish close linkages with communities one feels close to — without necessarily wanting to become a member of them. These rss feeds can also be implemented in threads readers, which are software packages that get you automatically and in real time the latest actualization of the sites you have subscribed to. Visiting the *Multitudes* website in order to read the latest articles, for instance, becomes unnecessary after pasting the link <http://multitudes.samizdat.net/backend.php3> in "Thunderbird", which gives you immediate access to the latest updates.

The second reason that should encourage us to undertake this effort at identification and analysis is the unbelievable variety of usages associated with syndication. One could refer here to the very innovative mobility practices alluded to earlier. But one should foremost point to the equally very innovative practices which relate to the general economy of the Net, beyond activist movements in the stricter sense. Initiatives like the "Creative Commons",¹⁷ Our Media,¹⁸ and Archive.org¹⁹ are extremely interesting in their own right and can be thought of in terms of a wholesale subversion of the Digital Right Management concept developed by the cultural industry to thwart the free distribution of copyrighted content on the net. To "put a file online" consisted up to now in opening up one's ftp client and uploading the file on a server. The Creative Commons community around the American law professor Lawrence Lessig developed a new kind of ftp client, "ccPublisher",²⁰ enabling one not only to upload a file on a server (such as Archive.org or Our Media), but also to add another one containing a machine readable copyright notice. As the creative author moves his production into the CC icon on his desktop, he opens a window asking him to fill a few description fields in order to generate a license. Once this is done, his content file plus the generated license are immediately transferred onto the distant server.

Syndicate! — or the communalization of political subjectivities

The weblog phenomenon has received a lot of publicity over the past months. But among the many explanations offered for it, precious few were helpful in understanding the specificity of what has become known as the "blogosphere". To define blogs as mere "personal diaries on the web" would certainly be miserly, and would probably also be a political blunder. This phenomenon should not be understood as yet another manifestation of an individualism nurtured by society in decay, but is on the contrary the result of a new technological articulation, made transparent by syndication, and taking place in between "intimateness" and "ex-timacy" — to borrow a concept of Laurence Allard. The "blogosphere" represents not simply the juxtaposition of intimate diaries, but is a true media space which enables subjectivities to exist on a territory of their own, while at the same time "weaving threads" among each other, and which makes it possible for them to assemble around a political and aesthetic subjectivity that is at once their own and shared. It is never "me" who decides whether someone is going to "syndicate" with me. It is always for the other party to decide, and vice-versa.

The hypothesis we would like to formulate at the end of this little exploratory note is, maybe somewhat provocatively, the following: isn't syndication one of

the machines of the communalization of minorities, who are by now so
 minority as to have become one, after all?

- 1 Cf. Howard Rheingold, *Smart Mobs. The Next Social Revolution*, Perseus Publishing, 2002.
- 2 *Txtmob*: <http://www.txtmob.com/>.
- 3 *Institute for Applied Autonomy*: <http://www.appliedautonomy.com/>.
- 4 *Moport*: <http://www.moport.org>.
- 5 See the *Moport RNC* archives: http://www.moport.org/rnc_moport.php.
- 6 "RNC" tag on *Flickr*: <http://www.flickr.com/photos/tags/rnc/>.
- 7 "StreetWriter" of the Institute for Applied Autonomy:
<http://www.appliedautonomy.com/sw.html>.
- 8 *Bike against Bush* by Joshua Kinberg: <http://www.bikesagainstbush.com/>.
- 9 The *RNC Redux* project page on *Screensaversgroup*:
<http://screensaversgroup.org/projects/rncredux/>.
- 10 Félix Guattari, *La révolution moléculaire*, 10/18, Paris, 1977, 370.
- 11 Critical Art Ensemble, *Electronic Civil Disobedience and Other Unpopular Ideas*,
 Autonomedia, 1996.
- 12 This application is developed under an Open License by the Waag Society in Amsterdam,
 which maintains close links with the Dutch activist and hacker scene.
- 13 Description of the Waag Society's *Keyworx* software: <http://www.keyworx.org/>.
- 14 Olivier Blondeau, "Become the Media! Du Post-Media au Médiascape", to be published in
 the French review *Chimères*,
http://www.freescape.eu.org/biblio/article.php3?id_article=214.
- 15 Michael Hardt and Toni Negri, *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire*, 2004.
- 16 Michel de Certeau, *L'invention du quotidien. Arts de faire*, tome I, Gallimard, Folio Essai
 (réédition), Paris, 1990, 57–63.
- 17 "Creative Commons": <http://creativecommons.org/>.
- 18 Our Media, the Global Home for Grassroots Media: <http://ourmedia.org>.
- 19 Internet Archive: <http://www.archive.org>.
- 20 ccPublisher 1.0 application: <http://creativecommons.org/weblog/entry/5193>.

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