

“Dealing with light, at the darkest of hours.” Johan Sjerpstra

The question of social networking sites in art and activism is highly strategic and touches on key issues, from internal organization to campaign design and publicity. What looks like yet another layer of social fluff asks for principled decisions. The moral panic condemns Web 2.0 as hype (“Disarm the Jugglers!”). The monotasking fraction calls for a public condemnation of the mainstream obsession with the latest gadgets and killer apps. Facebook is frying our brains and ruins academic prospects (if there ever was one). Such rushed critique of ideology stops us from making careful observations. Social media are invading all aspects of life. From a traditional ‘underground’ perspective it may be inconceivable to use Facebook or Twitter. According to the self-image the Maquis in the barrios communicates ‘breast to breast’ as Hakim Bey once called it. But today’s messy reality teaches us otherwise. Have you already tried not to use Google for a week? As others have tried before, it is certain you’re going to fail that test.

Hardcore underground can no longer dream of an invisible status because it is subjected to the same techno-surveillance as all others. In response, soft subcultures happily create websites, groups and channels in the hope to be left alone as a community. And indeed, it can be quiet, at the very end of the [Long Tail](#). But to demo the latest cultural artifacts the masses have not yet discovered is no longer hip either. There is no avant-garde outside the marketing realm. We have all understood the Laws of Cool so how can we get rid of this logic altogether? It is not enough to ‘uncool’ society. Can you ignore the iProducts? Social media promise to make unmediated, direct connections between people, and it is this utopian energy that drags us deeper into corporate media arrangements. Instead of making the simple call to reject such technologies once and for all, what is to be done?

Social media are playing an increasing role in the ‘organization of information’. Originally brushed aside as an ordinary online address book that generates meaning through informal chatting amongst ‘friends’, Web 2.0 is now a prime news source for millions. This in turn affects the way we transform news items into issues that we act upon. How does urgency occur? Official journalism is in an all-time crisis, but will we really delegate our need for our daily ‘world view’ to a diffuse cloud of blogs, tweets and emails? Not for the time being. In that sense [Jürgen Habermas](#) is still right. In the short run social media remain additional, secondary sources of information that primarily generate interpersonal context. From the perspective of the

attention economy they fragment the centralized public discourse as organized by print and broadcasting media. In the long run this perception of what constitutes 'news' will become less relevant.

The actual use of Web 2.0 is what counts here, not how op-eds and columnists frame the topics of the day. What we think is 'happening' is an outcome of the reconfiguration of the social, in favor of informal spheres, a media ecology in which we constantly check what's going on. The erosion of official media will only make it harder to define what a true 'underground' looks like. Hiding in the abandoned normalcy is, and always has been an option, but with the decline of Pop, it is becoming less and less sexy to survive in suburbia. Mashups and reappropriation techniques have exhausted themselves. The ruins of the industrial age have been recolonized and turned into valuable real estate. Squatting empty office spaces, symbols of the post-industrial era, has yet to take off—and may never happen because of harsh legal and surveillance regimes. Nothing is left behind. Abandoned space itself has become scarce—except the desert.

Scarcity of urban space pushes us further into the Net. This social fact alone confronts us with the Web 2.0 question. We need to mind a stricter separation between internal organization and external communication. Because of the lack of privacy and increased surveillance, (militant) protest can no longer rely on electronic devices in the early stages and decisive moments of socio-aesthetic action. This is a problem as, for instance, email is still used as a tool for mobilization and internal debate. It is tempting to use mobile phones on the streets to coordinate action. To decommission such tools at the right moment is an art in itself, comparable to the seventh sense one has to develop to locate the present surveillance video cameras. It is likely that activism has to, once again, become hyper-local and offline, in order to strike its target effectively. This might even be the case inside larger NGO structures.

After slow food, eco marketers have now discovered [slow communication](#). Will we soon get WiFi-free lounges in the name of leisure lifestyle? Let's not join that wave. Going offline should not be promoted as a belief system. Communication is not a religion, unless you have put all your bets on the implosion of all institutions. The necessity for mobilization in struggles needs to be distinguished from ecological trends such as farmers' markets that offer local produce. After Facebook changed its privacy settings, Mary Joyce of [DigiActive](#) advised fellow activists to unfriend fellow activists, leave any

political groups they were a member of: “Delete political status messages, notes, and links and do not add new ones, un-tag yourself from photos of you taking part in political activities or in the presence of known activists and remove any linkages connecting you to politically dangerous people, ideas, or organizations.” (December 10, 2009) This is a much more serious issue that should be discussed along the lines of [danah boyd’s work](#) which constantly warns of privacy issues on social networking sites.

Luddite offline strategies can only become real if practiced collectively after having been detached from individual lifestyle design. DigiActive continues: “Activists need to create separate anonymous profiles for their political activities, which contain no accurate personal information and are completely unconnected to their real friends, affiliations, and locations. In some cases, it may even make sense to create a ‘throw-away account,’ much as activists use throw-away cell phones: create a fake account to do one sensitive action, and then never use it again. So that a single IP address cannot be connected to you activism account, you should access that account from different public computers in cyber cafes and never from your home computer.” This is all future knowledge, so far only shared by the few.

In a discussion with Clay Shirky, [Evgeny Morozov](#) states: “I believe that a mass protest movement needs a charismatic leader, such as Sakharov, to really unfold its potential. I fear that the Twitter age will no longer produce a Sakharov.” New media actively deconstruct, disassemble, take apart, deschool, fragment, and decompose. The networked computer in that sense is a deeply post-modern Cold War machine. immobilize. The old-school masses on the streets used to delegate their desires and project them onto a charismatic leader. So far we have been looking in vain for how to reassemble the masses. What Morozov suggests here would start at the other end: there will be no masses as long as we sabotage the production of leaders in the first place. Instead of counter power, we have dismantled power itself. This would mean that we have reached the Foucauldian age.

A key moment for social movements is the initial contact between seemingly autonomous units. Let’s call it the erotica of touching. Ever experienced the metamorphosis of ‘weak links’ transmuting into revolutionary bonds? is hard to imagine that this exciting phase will be taken out of the digital equation. Creating new connections is pivotal in a political-artistic process. It is the moment of ‘change’ when the desert of consent turns into a blossoming oasis. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri: “The kind of transition we are

working with requires the growing autonomy from both private and public control; the metamorphosis of social subjects through training in cooperation, communication and organizing social encounters; and thus a progressive accumulation of the common.” (Commonwealth, p. 311) This is nothing but the science of revolution: the ultimate object for organisation studies and its ‘underground’ case study.

Reading the *Zeitgeist* correctly is no longer enough. We need to experiment with new forms of organization. This is what makes the reading of Žižek, Badiou and other academic revolutionaries unsatisfactory. Their recipes are straight-out retro-Leninist in rhetoric alone and lack curiosity for contemporary forms of organization. Web 2.0 puts the question on the table of how to organize dissent in the digital age. How do social movements these days come into being? If there is nowhere to hide should we adopt the ‘open conspiracy’ model? Do movements grow out of the ‘mass crystals’ that Elias Canetti talked about in his must-read classic *Crowds and Power*, the small and rigid groups that knew how to gather crowds on the streets and squares? Is this why we are so fascinated with ‘viral communication’? So far the curiosity has mainly been with the duplication aspect of ‘going viral’ (see Florian Cramer’s [Rotterdam viral communications conference](#), April 13, 2010). But who is designing the content that goes viral? Will ‘organized networks’ become the ‘crystals’ of the 21st century?

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