

PLANTS, ANDROIDS AND OPERATORS: A POST-MEDIA HANDBOOK



PML Books

EDITED BY CLEMENS APPRICH,
JOSEPHINE BERRY SLATER, ANTHONY ILES &
OLIVER LERONE SCHULTZ



CLICK SOCIAL ACTIVISM?
A LOCALISATION
OF POLITICAL
PARTICIPATION AFTER
NETWORKS

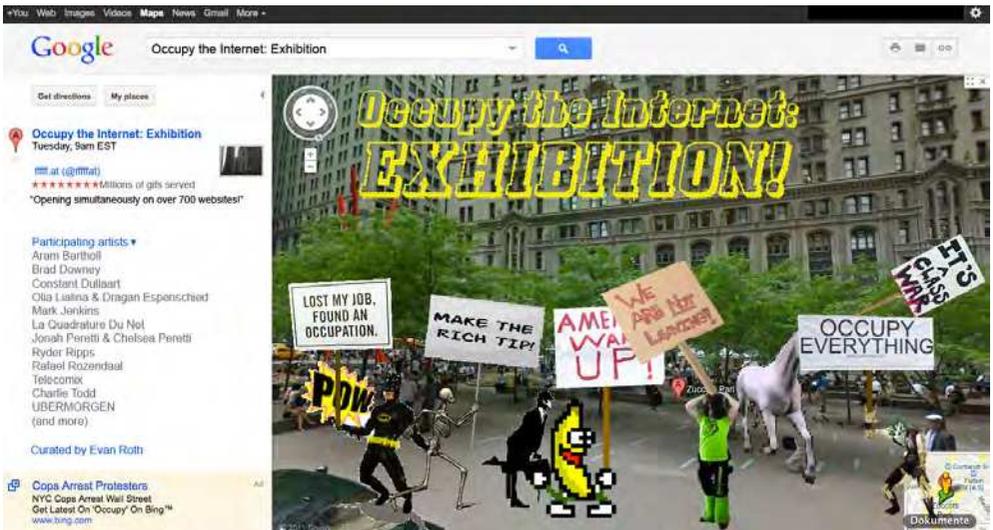
MORITZ QUEISNER

The Arena of Protest

The practices of the Occupy movement have reintroduced the category of space into forms of political protest. While the logistics of Occupy are built substantially upon digital networks, it was the physical assembly within squares and camps that made it a movement. The organisational logic of Occupy bridged the gap between online and offline protest by moving political participation from the internet to the streets. It was precisely this spatial shift of self-organised networks that triggered artist and activist collective Free Art and Technology Lab's idea for the browser extension Occupy the Internet! By occupying any website with virtual protesters, the armchair activist would still be able to participate 'in the recent global wave of revolution from the comfort of [her or his] home computer.'¹ At first glance this sounds like an obvious critique of online protest, but the virtual occupation of Zuccotti Park on Google Maps for instance instead points to the fact that the practices of online and offline protest are increasingly converging.

A key and widely contested argument in the current debate about the transformation of activism and protest, which Occupy the Internet! has emerged from, relates to the spatial mobilisation of location-bound practices: political participation in the digital society may no longer need the physical assembly of its actors. The networked technology paradigm has apparently detached communication from bodily presence. The main characteristic of this post-medial crisis is the transformation of individual forms of interaction. Net culture, has enabled new kinds of social interaction and community based forms of communication typically described as 'participatory' or 'democratic' – a concept that we tend to call 'social media'. Social media has created a dialogic and rhizomatic media culture that diverges from the atomistic communication infrastructure of the 20th century. The one-sided separation between broadcasters and recipients has been replaced or at least significantly extended, by a shared and horizontal feedback infrastructure whose participants are permanently broadcasting.

This transformation of communication goes along with a transformation of political participation that can be described by distinguishing three levels: actor, action and place. The first two have continuously dominated political debates about digital media: on an actor-level it is especially the empowerment of the individual that has initiated a new form of political agents such as followers, whistle-blowers, crowd-funders, bloggers or hacktivists – hardly very distinct classifications. Those actors have



Evan Roth & Free Art and Technology Lab, animated gif still of the Occupy the Internet! exhibition flyer, 2012



Screenshot of the 'avatars against the war' demonstration, Second Life, 2007

established new forms of action, whose central element of political power is accessing and exchanging information and whose types of interaction are neither hierarchic, centralised or institutionalised nor limited by spatial relations, territorial regulation or individual ownership. In other words, they do not necessarily depend on location (e.g. filesharing, DoS-attacks, crowd-sourcing, liking, data mining, following etc.)

The idea behind this paper is in contrast to this image of activism, to reconsider the category of place for the forms of political participation. The assumption is that there is a correlation between the transformation of social interaction and the current turn of the notion of place through location based media. It argues against the tendency that the relevance of place seems to have vanished with the ubiquity of digital computing. In the following three sections I would like to suggest that territoriality becomes increasingly important for the configuration of political action by developing a brief media history of the place in order to localise the changing forms of participation.

Space – the Final Frontier

On the morning of October 12th 1492 Christoph Columbus occupied America by plunging his banner deep into the sandy ground of the Bahamas. If we compare Columbus' occupation to the contemporary Occupy movement,



NSA Utah Data Centre, United States, The Domestic Surveillance Directorate, 2013

both forms of political practice are profoundly based on the category of place, where people claim a collective interest. The borders of what seems possible, of what seemed reachable to us, have long been dependent on spatial categories: on the movement of ourselves. Even science fiction narratives have mostly drawn on the notion of transit spaces in order to extend the ‘final frontier’ in order to ‘explore strange new worlds, to seek out new life and new civilizations, to boldly go where no man has gone before’ (*Star Trek*). When jumping into hyperspace, territory is no discrete abstract entity but an extended physical space, that corresponds much more to a vague than a virtual expansion of space. While this experience of space traditionally lays within the physical dimensions of the human body, this idea has been fundamentally challenged by electronic communication and later by digital media.

The anthropological organisation of space fell into crisis was when people were able to move information faster than themselves, when spatial thinking became emancipated from bodily presence. A phenomenon that we still euphorically refer to as the information revolution. Among the shades of this revolution, postmodern media theory largely neglected the concept of place. In the network society, information is rather described as a constant flow such as timelines or livestreams. In media theory this relativisation of anthropological boundaries of communication has led to paradigms such as ‘the end of geography’ (Jean Baudrillard), ‘the elimination of space’ (Paul Virilio) or the ‘disappearance of distance’ (Vilém Flusser).² Until today this concept has been connected to the vision of a network society in which the

question of place appeared to have vanished: the relative position of places to each other has been trivialised by spatial and temporal compression. The innovations of the so-called web 2.0 and ubiquitous computing have instead been accompanied by a topos that separates spatial movement from the human body – the everywhere of the ‘global village’ corresponds to an ‘esthétique de la disparition’ to quote the two most canonical terms from Marshall McLuhan and Virilio.

Arguing against the idea of this everywhere-ideology, the Occupy movement has given us a reason to localise the arena of online protest. The movement has shown that political actors of a digital society do not simply consist of virtual masses of protesting avatars, slacktivists or followers and that their actions do not only involve likes, DoS attacks, tweets, virtual demonstrations or one-click donations. But that the development from the isolated mass media spectator to the post-media networker of tactical technology integrates virtual and real forms of political participation. Accordingly, the assumption is that the forms of political protest dissociate from the concept of the virtual, while our interaction with and through digital technology becomes increasingly socially integrated and spatially contingent.

Cyberspace and the Information Superhighway

The rise of digital media did finally put an end to the limit of the traditional narration of space that culminated in the metaphor of cyberspace – a term that still represents the idea of the virtual as a parallel space whose only border is its difference from the physical. Most attempts to represent spatial relations beyond the physical have depicted the virtual either as an undefined space or as a tool of transmission. Perhaps you remember those awkward visualisations of the so-called information superhighway from the 1990s: deep blue data streets or dark tunnels towards a nowhere consisting of ones and zeros. Those visualisations of the web corresponded to an imagination of political participation styled upon the *Matrix* – either you were in or out.

Back then the World Wide Web was first and foremost imagined as a non-place: it was rather a highway than a square. Even though protest within the virtual could be spatially related, it remained an isolated and autonomous space, disconnected from any notion of place – a second life, that transcended our first lives. This ‘dualism’, as Sherry Turkle framed it,

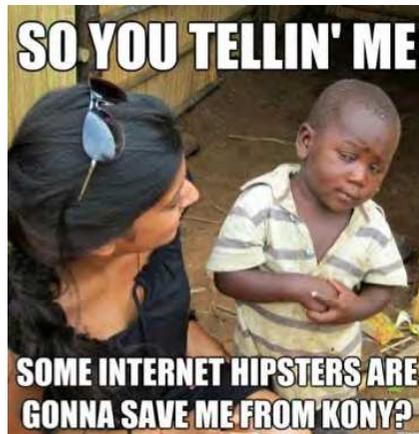
Feeding a child
in **Mali**...



...is only **one**
click away.



One-click charity,
advertisement on
Amazon.com, 2013



Meme relating to the 'Stop Kony' campaign of
Invisible Children Inc., anonymous, 2012

or this 'delusion' to quote Evgeny Morozov, still shapes our view and the critique of the forms of political participation after the social web – about 20 years after the cyberhype.³ A central quality of the social web is that it enables users to share content almost independent from spatial boundaries but still in real-time, for instance by organising political protest via Packet Radio, SMS or Twitter, by live-streaming what happens on the streets or through integrated community media like delegative or liquid democracy.

Those practices have created an architecture of participation which distinguishes them from the physical assembly of the parliament or the demonstration. An architecture that enables new forms of participation and intervention into political processes but that has also brought new places into the spotlight. Places such as the world's largest archive of political activism in Utah, United States, operated by the United States National Security Agency (NSA). Or Facebook's new server farm in Lulea, Finland close to the arctic circle where most of our Western European Facebook data is stored and processed. Both sites are still far from being in the centre of any political action, but they represent what I would call a shift in the organisational logic of the social web. They show that data is not free-floating in space, but that it is physical infrastructure that moves data – mostly fibre optic cables in the ground which are owned by corporations. And, even more importantly, they point to the fact that every single bit has an exact geolocation at any given time. This stands in opposition to the vision of an omnipresent, pervasive and ubiquitous digital space, that shapes the imagination of online protest as a form of political action in which information is not just simultaneously available (in time), but also everywhere (in space).

Accordingly, we can observe the formation of a horizontal and decentralised infrastructure of complex networks, in which digital media mobilises and organises a new form of political power. I signed a petition with Avaaz for global justice, I donated a dollar of my Amazon special deal coupon to feed a child in Mali, I denial-of-service attacked the Bank of America from my backyard, I liked a website against Nazis, I down-voted a racist comment on Youtube etc. The world wide debate around the Kony 2012 campaign about child soldiers in Uganda has shown that there is an increasing awareness that the social web does not simply virtualise the places of the political, but fosters a re-negotiation of what we want the places of political participation to be like. Millions of memes depict this gap between participation and location, between the virtual and the physical.

Hybrid Space and Location Awareness

While at first glance the forms of political participation in the era of the social web seem to become increasingly detached from places, we can also identify a shift, that pinpoints the limits of deterritorialisation – an idea that Aram Bartholl's work, *Map* (2006), addresses by transcribing the icons of the web into forms outside of the digital. This kind of limitation of ubiquitous computing became visible when the restrictions of connectivity within the Arab Spring forced protesters to use traditional place-bound media such as fax messages, leaflets, landlines or word of mouth. The shut down of internet connectivity or phone networks was rarely deployed before the rise of mobile media. With the mobilisation of computing the interaction with and through digital technology increasingly abandons the separation between the physical and the virtual – for instance when technology becomes smart and location aware (such as GPS, NFS, Bluetooth or wireless LAN). But how are locative technologies able to have a political impact?

Geo-referencing media technically works everywhere, but the content it produces is location-bound and dependent on a specific place as Thielmann and Döring have shown.⁴ Think for example of tracking and tracing systems such the street-toll system in Germany or remember that you increasingly see location specific status updates generated by geo-referencing tools in your Facebook timelines. Those location specific variations imply that digital and physical space are no longer separately organised but relate to each other. Digital codes and physical traces increasingly create a hybrid form of spatial representation, one that connects data and places and includes the location specific action of their users. In other words, territoriality becomes constitutive for our forms of social interaction and the configuration of political participation.

Take Sukey as an example beside many others: Sukey is a platform designed during the 2010 UK student protests to keep people safe, mobile and informed during demonstrations. It crowdsources information from online and offline sources such as Twitter or SMS to provide protesters with a real time overview of what is happening around them. Users can anonymously upload photos and text reports or tag tweets which are then structured and fed back to the platform. It seems as if this type of location-based data mining does not just apply to our digital footprint like communication profiles, travel logs, access control systems or payment methods but that online protest engages just as well with technology in ways that sets up new and hybrid forms of agency.⁵ Not only do mobile phones know where we are,



Aram Bartholl, *Map*, 2007

foursquare Ich suche nach ... Lüneburg, DE Moritz



Alle 45 anzeigen

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Al-Tahrir Square
Cairo, Egypt →

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Besucher Insg... 300
Insgesamte Ch... 733

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Tahrir Square, Downtown (Tahrir Square)
- Maspiro**
Kornieh El-Nile
- Omar Makram Mosque**
Tahrir Sq

Screenshot of Foursquare check-in on Tahrir Square, <https://foursquare.com>, 2013

where we have been and even where we are most probably about to go next, riot navigation systems also guide us safely through demonstrations, just as hashtags are filtered according to their location, GPS chips add geolocations to our visual status updates or location based surveillance technologies (such as most smartphone apps) recognise us according to our use of technical devices. It seems like we might check-in a revolution on foursquare just as we lifeblog workout runs.

Obviously, the political actors of a digital society no longer separate 'the internet' from 'the streets'. Instead the development from the isolated mass media spectator to the post-media networker of tactical technology integrates virtual and real forms of political participation. While the forms of political protest dissociate from the concept of the virtual, our interaction with and through digital technology becomes increasingly socially integrated and spatially contingent. Territoriality has finally become a kind of authorship and our movements themselves are turning into a political practice. The social graph that we so desperately try to resist might indeed be increasingly correlated with a place graph. But the loss of individual autonomy that we experience when using services like Google or Facebook might be accompanied with new forms of crowdsourced and collective agency that create new places and disclose a new kind of spatial experience.

Footnotes

- 1 fffffat 2011
- 2 See respectively, Richard Smith, 'The End of Geography and *Radical Politics in Baudrillard's Philosophy*', *Environment and Planning – D: Society and Space*, 15(3), pp.305–320 and Vilém Flusser, 'Das Verschwinden der Ferne', *Archplus*, Jg. 24, Nr. 111, 1992, pp.31–32, Paul Virilio, *Speed and Politics: An Essay on Dromology*, New York, 1977.
- 3 Respectively, Sherry Turkle, *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other*, New York, 2011 and Evgeny Morozov, *The Net Delusion: How not to liberate the world*, London, 2011.
- 4 Jörg Döring, & Tristan Thielmann (Eds.), *Mediengeographie*, Bielefeld, 2009 and fffffat, 'Occupy the Internet!', 2011, <http://fffff.at/occupy-the-internet/>
- 5 Editors' note: for criticisms of Sukey in the UK context see the Libcom forum thread, 'Sukey Sucks', <http://libcom.org/forums/general/sukey-sucks-09022011> and Random Blowe, 'The Curious Case Of Sukey And The Bizarre Press Release', <http://www.blowe.org.uk/2011/02/curious-case-of-sukey-and-bizarre-press.html>

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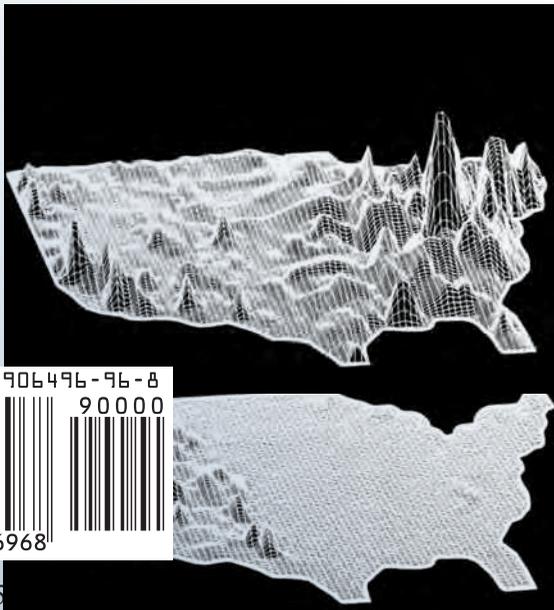
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Edited by **Clemens Apprich, Josephine Berry Slater, Anthony Iles & Oliver Lerone Schultz**

This book documents the first life-cycle of the Post-Media Lab (2011-2014). Taking up Félix Guattari's challenge, the Lab aimed to combine social and media practices into collective assemblages of enunciation in order to confront social monoformity. Here we draw together some key essays, images and art projects by the Lab's participants, as well as a close documentation of its associated events, talks, and exhibitions, to create a vivid portrayal of post-media practice today.

With contributions by: **Clemens Apprich, Josephine Berry Slater, Micha Cárdenas, Sean Dockray, Mina Emad, Bogdan Dragos & Inigo Wilkins, Fabien Giraud, Adnan Hadzi & James Stevens, Martin Howse & Jonathan Kemp, irrational.org, Anthony Iles, Oliver Lerone Schultz, Gordan Savičić, Moritz Queisner, Rózsa Zita Farkas**

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