

Air Unconditioning

The author analyses the social relationships that have been generated by communication networks, and argues that the interest of this technology lies more in the social use that can be made of it than in the technology itself. She briefly examines some of the most significant active community network projects, and raises a number of questions regarding freedom of communication, the possibility of sharing contents and the commercial interests that stalk them.

Communication networks and particularly the internet have changed social relationships, consumption and cultural exchange, aiding the development of communities and debate, in the form of mailing lists, forums and data exchange systems¹.

If we start from the idea that the current interest in internet is more social than technological, it seems appropriate to analyse some of the Net's social uses and results. With this aim in mind, we will centre on three types of complex community: community networks, tactical networks of independent media and activist campaigns and free wireless networks, and link them to some projects by artists working in these areas.

One of the most widespread proposals for the social use of the internet is the community network. These networks, which generally begin with civil initiatives, act as a virtual extension of the community, like digital neighbourhoods and virtual gateways for neighbourhood services. Another common feature is a physical space containing computers, where basic training is given in "new technologies" and other cultural or educational activities².

However, these proposals are not truly effective if they do not look beyond simply connecting people to the internet and making them computer literate. We know that connectivity in itself is not enough for a more efficient democratisation of urban life, because citizens continue to be users, not inhabitants and creators of the net society. The great "digital gap" is not simply a question of access; it also involves the way in which that access is used by different social groups.

FLEXible City

In 1998, the group Superflex³ constructed a digital reproduction of the city of Karlskrona in Sweden⁴. This exact replica can be accessed by citizens (who are also replicated in the project as avatars) over the internet. The virtual citizens meet and act in such a way that the city and its functions are redefined. Consequently, the social hierarchy is also altered and renewed. Karlskrona2 was also projected onto a large video screen in the central square of the "real" city of Karlskrona. Here people could come together in the physical space to follow the activities of their avatars and consider the differences between the two types of city.

The project was inspired by a vision of the internet more as a local network than as an instrument of global communication. The results have been used to seek other civil, urban, and communication strategies at a local level. One of the main aims was that this new situation, freed from the legal, economic and social rules of

Karlskrona, might generate ideas from the citizens themselves about ways to free the physical public space.

The project indirectly served to make the people of Karlskrona more familiar with the internet and its typical participation models and should be taken into account in building any community network.

We wonder what might have happened if this sort of Simcity⁵ had been applied to the Poble Nou district in Barcelona before the whole 22@ urban planning project⁶ began. What might have happened if it had been made available to Associació d'Afectats 22@⁷, an association which seeks to defend and represent those affected, protect all homes and companies in the district and participate in the debate on the urban projects of the 22@ plan?

Let's Squat the Air

On 18 January an experimental event took place in Seville, combining urban planning, audio-visual recreation and independent media. The event was produced by the hackitectura.net office of Wewearbuildings⁸ with the collaboration of a network of groups from Spain and other countries linked over the internet. Using audio and video projections transmitted from the different connected cities, participants transformed and appropriated the high-speed train station on Cartuja Island (built for Expo '92 and now derelict). The action was closely related to the investigation into global connectivity and wireless networks, but from an angle of cyberpunk fiction and the alternative uses of public spaces. The project centred on the socio-cultural conflicts of the globalised world, and the entire infrastructure was managed using freeware. This was an attempt to show how a public space can be re-occupied and re-politicised using free wireless networks, streaming media tools and an attitude that comes half-way between *traveller* and *hacker*⁹. The spontaneous techno-occupation of wewearbuildings and the architecturally sophisticated leftovers of Expo92 bring us back to the post-2004 situation of the Poble Nou district, and we wonder what type of uses and disuse will be found for the large facilities built for the Forum of Cultures¹⁰.

Tactical memory

Community Memory¹¹ which was set up in Berkeley, California, in the early 1970s within the framework of the counterculture, was the first precursor of the community networks we know today. (The first real community network in the strict sense of the term was Cleveland Free-Net¹².) Community Memory was one of the first experiences to use technology from a social perspective. Lee Felsenstein and Efram Lipkin set up a small network of public terminals connected to a micro-computer, where local people could participate in discussion forums, interact with others and share knowledge. The terminals, located in public places such as libraries or laundromats, allowed free and unrestricted access (although it cost one dollar to create a new forum) and permitted anonymity. One of the important features of this early experience was the creation of a database with the names of those who had died in the Korean and Vietnam wars.

In Community Memory we can see how from the "collectivism" of the era, a social use was made of the technology, finding new means of communication,

organisation and other previously untried strategies. Currently, the terms digitisation, computerisation and globalisation encompass a large number of political, socio-cultural, economic and social conflicts whose dimension and scope cannot easily be predicted. Some time ago, in the midst of this disorder, the road to a collectivism with new political forms of expression and action was opened up.

These new types of collectivism, which sprang from collaboration between artists and media activists, have spread and taken shape in the so-called tactical media. The term was first used in Amsterdam and is linked directly to the *Next 5 Minutes* festival.

David García, in an interview with Andreas Broeckmann, says of the tactical or strategic media that "we were referring to this capacity to create effective languages for users (virtual or real) which engage and spread instead of imposing and demanding, which is one of the characteristics of strategic creators. Posters, videos, installations, murals, graphics and television channels not only triumphed as art and collectivism, but were also successful as art because they transmitted an effective collectivism (...). The proper term is possibly a strategic solution, an improvisation that has shown to be a surprisingly useful provisional measure, like the X variable in algebra"¹³.

In these tactical attitudes we can see that the fundamental thing is not the fact that the technology and the network are used without prejudice, but that they find inspiration in how these elements work in order to discover new methods and reach the required goals. The tool is the strategy.

No one is Illegal, Everyone is an Expert

No one is Illegal is based on a manifesto from Documenta X published by activists, artists, photographers and film in 1997. As Florian Schneider says, "nobody was really an expert, but we were all curious to enrich and expand our classical political symbolism: setting up websites, e-mails, online radio stations, exchanging videos, videoconferences with hundreds of participants and even broadcasting demonstrations using mobile phones"¹⁴.

The manifesto was a success, and the campaign began with decentralised activities in dozens of local networks in Germany. The aims ranged from concealing and helping illegal immigrants to organising public debates on illegal immigration and protests against deportation. In 1998, the *No one is Illegal* network set up the Caravan for the Rights of Refugees and Migrants, and coinciding with the German elections travelled through over 40 cities with the slogan: "We don't have a vote, but we do have a voice". The second activity consisted of a camp on the German - Polish border. The idea of camps against the frontier system has subsequently been repeated, involving more areas and groups. It has been proposed to make connections with other simultaneous camps throughout Europe and the United States using the internet, mobile phones, mail and personal exchange. The rallying cry for this type of meeting was "Hacking the Border", and this finally spawned another parallel network and campaign¹⁵.

Information technology has served to globalise the campaigns; the next step is to create tools.

In 2001, Florian Schneider organised the Make World festival¹⁶, and in conversations with Shu Lea Cheang they decided to launch a new more "positive" strategy than *No one is Illegal*. Thus began *Everyone is an E*

*xpert*¹⁷.

It started from an internet database, *The Expert Base*, which seeks to compile information on the skills of people who are not registered in any official or commercial database. In some ways, it is a logical follow-on from *No one is Illegal*, because its aim is to look for work for these groups who are excluded from the labour market, either because they do not have residence permits, because of discrimination or because they perform activities that the system does not consider to be work (artists themselves, for example)¹⁸. At the same time, it calls into question what an “expert” is.

Expert Base is joined by *Expertmobile*, a mobile unit which complements the on-line aspect of the campaign at local level. This "expert van" travels to social forums, demonstrations and activist situations. It contains a station for postproduction and satellite connection to allow it to broadcast wherever it goes¹⁹.

The use of *Expert Base* and *Expertmobile* is its only value, and the idea is based on open source and open borders.

Open source (which has always been very closely linked with freeware) does not only mean access to the source code of a programme; it means free code distribution and modification, and no restriction on its use in a specific field of application, or discrimination on use and access by anyone.

The open source philosophy is applied to *Everyone is an Expert*, where the code is seen as the information that is generated, shared, modified and which travels between uses and people. Open border, on the other hand, leads directly to the breakdown of all kinds of borders, be they spatial, socio-cultural or work-related. All networks tend to break down the idea of the border, of limits; even a closed network naturally tends to expand and find connection points that open it up to other networks.

Techno-social laboratories

Internet, the network of networks, was previously defined by the set of TCP-IP protocols that led to its creation and popularisation and which was supplemented with the Web. But now, using wireless technology, it is possible to build local wireless networks based on other protocols and on the web, but completely outside the internet, if necessary²⁰. Indeed, these wireless networks are creating great expectations, both in the second generation of community networks and for communities that seek to organise, distribute and maintain their information freely without have to depend on any ISP or other control.

All the evidence suggests that the powerful combination of wireless with the co-operation and freeware culture is turning these networks into real techno-social laboratories.

The pioneer in this area is the community of Seattlewireless.net which was founded in the neighbourhood of Capitol Hill in Seattle, USA. To date, this community has the most inhabitants and is the most functional (it is hardly surprising that the area has a large concentration of residents working in technical areas). Its founders say the benefits have been felt both by local people and by companies and teleworking initiatives.

Here in Europe there is the Consume.net community in London, which also develops freeware for re-using old computers and reducing costs. This network is unusual in that it was created at the initiative not only of security technicians and experts on networks, but also of digital artists and socio-cultural activists. This is

reflected in the uses and contents of the network—for example, there is a sub-community-section entitled FocusOnArt.

The leading wireless groups in Spain are: Redlibre.net, Madridwireless.net and Zaragozaawireless.org who have done excellent work in extending free wireless networks and providing support.

At present these efforts are basically oriented towards creating the infrastructure, the topology of the network, and their ultimate aim is to unite the different communities that have sprung up and create a global network in parallel with the internet. The creation of this free wireless network would involve the development of a network and above all, a new way of managing the network outside the control of the telecommunications multinationals who currently exercise absolute control over information flows. Indeed, such a development would in some ways mark a return to the origins of the internet, starting from a civil initiative rather than from the academic university world.

Wireless is more...

Seventy years ago, during the great depression in the USA, a system of symbols was developed which was used to indicate where people could get some food. This idea has been taken up again with the emergence of street signs to indicate the existence of a wireless connection to the internet, and the symbols are now used in many cities²¹. This takes us to Daniel García Andújar's artistic project in the Palacio de la Virreina (Barcelona), as part of the *Banquete* exhibition²². *Individual-citizen Republic Project* consisted of an information space with texts from the internet and free internet access from a series of computers fitted with Linux and connected using wireless technology. The space was supplemented with the workshop, Banquetewireless, in which Bcnwireless.net collaborated. Supposedly, the aerial that was installed on top of the building opposite the Ramblas gave coverage to the entire city, theoretically affording free access to everyone in Barcelona. What actually happened, though? Few people heard about the project, few people had a laptop and even fewer had one with a wireless card—and few knew how to configure it and access that welcome banquet of bandwidth. Giving a feast of connections to a privileged few, in this case from the information world, is a contradictory result given what wireless communities seek to represent. It is a pity a project of this type failed to be used at a social level.

If the communities of free networks managed to achieve their global objective, would there be a migration of contents to this new network, first duplicating, and ultimately abandoning the internet? Does this mean that the internet would survive as a HYPERmarket? If this were the case, sooner or later, would this supposed internet-shopping-centre not end up offering free connection? After all, what potential buyer wants to pay just to go into a shop and take a look around? Would there be rules on contents and uses in this free network, to prevent the internet panorama being repeated? Could the exclusive use of freeware go from being a freedom to an imposition? Do citizens have the technical and ethical training to stop being users and become inhabitants and creators of a free network? Will proper social use of the technology really make people free to communicate and share information, or is it just a slogan of the mobile phone companies?

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NOTES AND REFERENCES

¹ A number of phenomena in recent times have convinced us that we stand at a crucial moment in the debate on the validity and function of this type of activity. On the one hand, we have the posting online of the files of all the theme groups from the Usenet newsgroups, i.e. the history from 1981 of private communication via internet. On the other hand we have Rhizome's difficulties in finding a system for preserving and financing its activity, the announcement of the closure of Aleph and the threat of the legal closure of the entire *The Thing* artists' network over an unresolved law-suit. Despite this online crisis, these activities continue to grow, supplemented with the creation of meeting points in physical spaces such as media labs, media lounges, congresses, seminars, festivals, in a plethora of freeware and freenets.

Usenet:

<http://groups.google.com>

<http://www2.webmagic.com/usenet.org>

Rhizome

<http://www.rhizome.org>

Rhizome One Day Left digest

<http://amsterdam.nettime.org/Lists-Archives/nettime-1-0301/msg00104.html>

Aleph

<http://aleph-arts.org>

The thing

<http://bbs.thing.net/>

For more on the case of The Thing vs. Dow, see the article by R. Bosco and S. Caldana <http://www.rtmk.com/more/articles/thingelpais.html>

² The first in Spain—Tinet.org—was opened in Tarragona in 1994. Catalonia has a particularly good array of community networks. One of the most important is Ravalnet.net, which combines the concept of community technology centre with that of host for neighbourhood associations.

³ <http://www.superflex.dk>

⁴ <http://www.superflex.dk/tools/supercity>

⁵ <http://www.sc4ever.com>

⁶ <http://www.bcn.es/22@bcn/cast/presentacion/index.html>

⁷ <http://www.forumperjudicats.com/htm/afectats/05abril2002.htm>

⁸ <http://www.hackitectura.net/puredata/>

<http://www.wewearbuildings.cc/>

<http://www.hackitectura.net>

⁹ Other hacker architecture events are planned in Asturias over coming months:

<http://www.hackitectura.net/corvera>

<http://www.hackitectura.net/ensidesa2050/temporal.htm>

¹⁰ Architect Josep Lluís Mateo, speaking at a debate that formed part of the Macba public sessions in the workshop *From Les Glories to El Bes s: urban change and public space in the metropolis of Barcelona* (directed by Ramon Parramon and Muntadas), spoke about the new constructions for the Forum of Cultures 2004 and specifically about the convention building he is in charge of. He remarked that it was a very difficult building, another non-place of transit, and that he had been told to design it without windows, meaning that it would be completely disconnected from the local surroundings; he said he was intrigued to know the social use this hangar would have for diplomats, but that he could not predict the results.

¹¹ <http://memex.org/community-memory.html>

<http://home.inreach.com/cisler/citizens.htm>

¹² Cleveland Freenet closed in October 1999.

<http://amsterdam.nettime.org/Lists-Archives/nettime-1-9910/msg00013.html>

¹³ <http://www.contrast.org/borders/kein>

¹⁴ <http://www.ucm.es/info/adnrecal/libreria/textos/hack.htm>

¹⁵ <http://www.noborder.org/>

¹⁶ <http://www.make-world.org/>

¹⁷ <http://www.muenster.de/%7Euwz/expert/>

¹⁸ Here we need to relativise to some extent the effectiveness of tactical projects within the theme of emigration. We know that many emigrants (especially in the north of Europe) are practically autonomous in weaving their own parallel communication and work networks. New websites they have created meet the aims of arming a transnational community; are oriented towards mutual help; favour intercultural dialogue and facilitate—in the case of campaigns—global political effectiveness. Obviously, these technologies (internet and mobile phones) are used above all to communicate between families and friends, and logically, when the participants have neither a residence permit, job, or fixed legal recognition, they facilitate the creation of a variety of "informal" businesses. Nonetheless, we see that women emigrants tend to remain excluded from these networks and we think that specific tactical projects should be created with them.

¹⁹ Florian Schneider will be in Barcelona with the Expertmobile at the end of May and participates in the seminar-workshop *Media_Space Invaders*, which deals with subjects such as the democratisation of the media and forms of independent self-organisation. Among the activities planned, there will be a series of actions under the general theme *Everyone is an expert*. <http://www.platoniq.net/invasores>

²⁰ Wireless networks are based on the 802.11b or wi-fi protocol. In simplified form, they operate as follows: the members of the community establish nodes in their own homes. A node consists of an access point (a type of router for wireless connection, although it could also be an old computer with Linux and a wireless card) and an aerial, which maintains signal gain. In the node's coverage area it is possible to connect with other nodes (thus forming the network) or allow occasional clients to connect, such as laptops with a card for wireless connection. The frequencies used are in the microwave range, 2.4GHz, which does not involve legal problems, since for the moment they are experimental public bands and are openly available for this type of device.

²¹ <http://www.warchalking.org>

²² Exposición Banquete_metabolismo y comunicación <http://www.banquete.org/indexEspagnol.htm>