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[6] www.potatoland.org

[7] <http://www.elpais.com/articulo/ocio/Rhizome/cumple/anos/>

[8] Cf. Peter SLOTERDIJK, *En el mismo barco. Ensayo sobre la hiperpolítica*; Siruela; Madrid; 1994.

[9] They later changed their name to Electronic Disturbance Theatre.

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RECLAIM THE BACKBONE: RETHINKING THE INTERNET AS A PUBLIC SPACE.

[DAVID GASAGUBERTA]

0. INTRODUCTION

It is a commonplace to refer to the Internet as a public space. In fact, one of the first metaphors used to explain the Internet to people was that of the "agora" or public square. This vision is doubtlessly attractive and adapted to ideologies that define the Internet, consciously or subconsciously, since the 1960s. However, this manner of representing the World Wide Web is neither consistent with the processes of governance on the Web, nor with the way in which users interact with it on a daily basis.

This text aims to reconsider this vision of the Internet as a public space, firstly pointing out the diverse problems that difficult this perception of the Internet as a public space. After which, we shall analyse how digital art can help us to reassess some characteristics of the Internet as something public, that are not necessarily all that desirable for its future development.

1. WHERE DOES THE IDEA OF THE INTERNET AS A PUBLIC SPACE COME FROM?

There are many legends as to the forces that designed the Internet's protocols, as we know them. It is often claimed, that the Web emerged as a spin-off of military research on communication tools capable of withstanding nuclear war. The truth is that although the creators of the first version of the Internet (DARPANET) did try to "sell" a project of this kind to the military, the latter were unconvinced. In the end, the development of this first horizontal computer network aimed to facilitate the communication between

scientific researchers that worked in projects financed by the Pentagon (see Castells 2001).

The alleged military origin has been the talk-of-the-town for many post-modernists seeking hidden agendas behind the development of the Internet. Nevertheless, the truth is that the ideology behind the development of the Internet is closer to the figure of the university student/hacker (according to Himanen's 2002 interpretation of the term, not in its usual media sense that assimilates hackers with information technology pirates) and American 1960s counter-culture (see Markoff 2005). To a lesser degree it is also associated with a specific libertarian ideology (in the sense referred to in Nozick 1974) raised by some of the key figures in the ideological development of cyber-rights and the new economy, figures such as John Perry Barlow or Esther Dyson.

A series of utopias grew from this unusual and unforeseeable ideological soup, shaping, not only, the philosophical and political perception of the Internet –which is quite logical- but also the development of the technology itself. If emails are the way they are at present, this is not exclusively due to purely technological concerns, but also the shared ideology of the different "fathers" of the Internet. They included basic ideas about what is knowledge and how to distribute information when they developed the first communicative protocols for the Internet. Similarly, our conception of what kind of "space" the Internet might become, and the fact that we imagine it as a public space, stems from these same ideologies. Let us now analyse these ideologies in greater detail and see how they are established:

Firstly, we have what we may call the "communicative utopia." This is one of the most firmly rooted ideals in the development of the Internet from its beginnings. We can also find it implemented in Internet communication protocols. In its most basic form, it is enshrined in a famous saying: "Information wants to be free." Himanen

(2002) explains this process in detail and with much intuition, demonstrating how this universalist ideal of allowing the free flow of information stems from the same university model of understanding information. This conception is at the very foundation of what he refers to as "hacker ethics," the ethics of the worker and developer of the new information society.

A second utopia, also present in the Web's origins is that of political utopia. The greatest representative of this utopia is without a doubt the famous "Declaration of Independence of Cyberspace" by John Perry Barlow (Barlow 1996). In this text, Barlow defends the thesis that the Internet will become the new frontier (as understood by the pioneers that travelled west) and that this new frontier has to be organised in a self-managed manner, without any kind of interference from government or politicians, judges or lawyers. The text was sufficiently generic and lyrical so as not to exhibit the powerful libertarian ideology (according to Nozick's interpretation, as mentioned previously, which implies that government action is limited to guaranteeing laws and that society is self-managed by individuals following the free market laws) behind it. Therefore, it worked as a powerful meme; the text was translated into dozens of languages, becoming the seed for the first groups of Internet activists.

If Barlow's political vision was to create a new utopia in which politicians had no involvement, a third utopia that veers further left was set against it. Although the left originally tends to perceive the Internet, basically, as an alienating space geared at exploiting the proletariat and defending savage globalisation (see Casacuberta 1998), it gradually discovered the potential of the Internet as a tool for communication. Furthermore, a tool that is much less vulnerable to government censorship and a relatively cheap tool as well. Thus, an activist ideology emerges, that sees the Internet above all as an underground (hereby

recovering the ideological basis of counter-culture, which has always been a backdrop for the Internet). This underground allows for organisation and communication that heightens any transformation of reality. If Barlow wishes to develop a utopia that is far-removed from reality, the activist utopia seeks to transform reality through the Internet. If we are capable of overcoming the semantic undergrowth, and the syntactic exasperation of Empire, (Hardt and Negri 2002) we shall find the theoretical reconstruction of this ideology.

Certainly, information is one thing, and knowledge is another; no matter how close they may seem to be. Therefore, we can also mention a utopia of knowledge, closely linked to the previous utopia of information. The best illustration of this ideology is to be found in the development of free software; the idea that software should not be owned, and that both knowledge and information must be free and liable of being reused. Although, this might have seemed like a fairly technical implication (the need for software to be "liberated" in the sense of opening the source codes for other programmers to learn how it works, and possibly modify it), in reality from its beginnings it has always been an ideological statement. The idea that knowledge is at everyone's disposal and is not controlled by economic principles. Thereby, it is no surprise, that the main ideological stalwart of the free software movement, Richard Stallman (see Stallman, Lessig, Gay 2002) considers that software, which is nothing more than algorithms, in itself nothing more than mathematics, must be free and unpatentable, in the same way as nobody can patent the Pythagorean Theorem or the values of Pi.

We are therefore approaching a synthesis utopia, the self-organising utopia. Elaborated as a quote by the hacker and information technology executive, John Guilmore, we do not expect that governments will guarantee our rights, we can do so ourselves through physics and mathematics. We therefore,

combine the idea that information and knowledge must be free (knowledge such as cryptography or information technology security) with the political utopia of organisation independently from government.

2. THE PROBLEMS OF CONSIDERING THE INTERNET AS A PUBLIC SPACE

Firstly, we should consider the collateral effects that this utopian vision has on our lives, and these are not always positive. Hence, an annoying phenomenon, such as spam, is possible precisely because the Internet's "founding fathers" decided to create an Internet where information had to be free –always. Far more problematic are the criminal uses this open network possibilities. The list is enormous and has been repeated ad nauseam, so there is no need to do so here.

Finally, the idea that knowledge must be free and must therefore flow is responsible for the international overload that appears each time we seek information on the Internet. It is also worth stressing that quantity is no guarantee of quality. We can sum it up by recovering the malicious –although quite truthful- aphorism that states that the Internet is an ocean of wisdom...but only a few centimetres deep. However, let us not focus on this here. Clearly, anything positive will end up developing wrongful uses. What we want to stress is the idea that the Internet is, effectively, a public space.

We can observe that as a public space, it is not equally accessible to all. Firstly, because of where we live, or our economic capacity we may not have access to the same infrastructure. If we can access it, we may not have the sufficient technical expertise to use it (for example, we might live in a neighbourhood with free Wi-Fi access but not know how to use a computer). Having technical skills does not guarantee that we can use these technologies to establish empowerment processes. As Amartya Sen (Sen 1999) points out, it is not enough to have operative knowledge of a technological

system; we must also have the capacities to use it in a way that can truly transform our lives and allow us to be in a situation of equal opportunities with the rest of citizens. Currently, in our country there are many "functional digital illiterates," for whom these technologies have no significant impact on their lives, despite having attended theoretical courses on how to use an operating system and the relevant office productivity systems. Another important problem is that of the physical ownership of the Internet. The Internet operates thanks to the existence of a series of machines known as the "backbone" that enable truly fluid, stable and efficient communications. Who controls the backbone, controls the Internet. We frequently hear comments such as, "the Internet cannot be controlled," "the Internet is inherently anarchic," "no government can dominate the Internet," etc. These statements might be factually true, but they generate an important error by assuming that the Internet has a specific definable nature. As Lawrence Lessig (see Lessig 1999) rightly argues, the Internet has no nature -the Internet is code. Not only in the technical sense of the term, but also in the legal sense (Lessig is a professor of law). Therefore, as its nature is pure convention it is something, basically, fluid, modifiable whenever a new convention appears. In the same way as a penal code or a constitution are liable of being amended, so too can the "nature" of the Internet, by changing the code of its protocols. In his text, Lessig is pessimistic, arguing that, on the basis of a series of excuses associated to the rampant criminality that allegedly exists on the Internet (child pornography and terrorism as the two main evils) it would be easy to develop a new layer of code, loaded onto the backbone. This new layer would permanently identify the users, registering all of their actions. In so doing, the Internet would metamorphose from anarchy to a world much closer to Orwell's "1984."

We can start to see traces of Lessig's prophecy in the manner in which Google,

Amazon and other Web 2.0 companies are creating and storing user profiles. In theory, they do so for marketing purposes, and they do not associate them with any specific name, but things can change –and they surely will.

It is also paradoxical that the Web 2.0 has transformed our leisure time into work time for third parties: while we are uploading photographs onto Flickr, music onto Myspace, videos onto YouTube, or even creating links to pages that we enjoy, we are helping to cement the economic profitability of Flickr, Google or Myspace.

The most problematic issue in any case is the distorted vision that most users have of the Internet. On the one hand, it is, basically, a transparent space in which all of our actions are registered. Internet providers register what pages we visit, Google has listings of all our searches on its server, Amazon stores all of our preferences in books, music or electronic equipment, our emails are registered on many servers and are easily accessible with technologies such as sniffers. However, on the other hand, we operate as if the Internet were basically an opaque space in which nobody can observe our actions, as if the fact that "nobody is watching" makes us invisible on the Internet, as if emails travel directly from our computer to that of our recipient, when in reality they go through –and are archived- in hundreds of intermediary computers.

All of the above converts the Internet into a very peculiar public space. As a physical public space in which not only all the streets are packed with cameras (something, which unfortunately is becoming closer to reality), but these cameras have a recognition system capable of identifying and recording each person, every action, in a detailed and reusable manner.

Artists are equally conscious of this state of affairs. Many have developed all kind of performative propositions or net.art interventions to capture, recover, and criticise these processes. Starting from the final paradox that ended the previous section, how

our behaviour on the Internet is totally inconsistent with the manner in which it is currently presented and how we take for granted certain things which could easily change, I consider that artistic projects focused on the amplification of the Internet's anarchic virtues are less interesting. On the contrary, I believe that projects that seek to provoke thought in the user regarding these alleged virtues of the Internet as a public space of freedom, and which also highlight the negative aspects are far more interesting. This is not a leisurely activity, nor a belief that "life was better without the Internet." The idea is rather to abandon part of this hopeful optimism regarding the Web's potential, and to de-ideologise net.art.

Faced with projects that use the Internet in a basically instrumental fashion, to organise a certain artistic and ideological discourse, I wish to defend the original net.art, that from the "heroic period" as Olia Lialina likes to define it. In that context, the Internet was both the object and the subject of artistic projects, and the approximation to the Web was more neutral and realistic. Despite –or possibly thanks to– this neutrality, these projects offer an ideological activating message that is much more interesting than that of e-utopias. Therefore, it is a platitude to criticise the first net.artists (JODI, Lialina, Etoy, Shulgin, Cosic, etc.) for creating art that is far removed from the "true nature" of the Internet, of its "Underground." In reality, even metalinguistic artists such as JODI offer a far more interesting activist message than these alleged advocates of the Internet's "anarchic nature," as they were the first to prove that this nature actually did not exist.

As a result, a historic project such as JODI's www.jodi.org (currently available in www.jodi.org) managed to give rise to a debate regarding the "nature" of the World Wide Web. When everyone was creating Web pages as if they were scientific revues, but with hyperlinks, JODI deconstructed the surfing process, forcing the users to question what the WWW was all

about, what it was for and how one could organise the information.

3. BY WAY OF CONCLUSION

I believe that one of art's functions is to point towards where nobody is currently looking. This can be done through non-conceptual strategies, as concepts merely point out that which everyone is already talking about. In our contemporary art, that adores philosophical debate and uses it as an alibi to justify the impact of a piece or performance, a new heroic period is begging to come out again, where art will point precisely towards the weak and unnecessary nature of the current conceptual debate. The days of utopia are starting to fade away; we must revise our beliefs regarding the Internet as a public space from dystopia. As in the famous Zen koan of the finger that points to the Moon, we have spent too long staring at the finger. We must now direct our stare towards the Moon.

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MAIL ART AS A FORERUNNER OF NET.ART: CLEMENTE PADÍN

[MICHELA ROSSO]

"Nowadays [...], many critics are astounded by the populous and interactive nature of the art that is generated on the Net and that the Internet is promoting, without being aware of the fact that these networks and features have existed since the end of the 1960s, in the artistic work of those pioneers who saw, in communication at a distance (Mail Art or Arte Correo), the medium through which to broadcast their ideals of understanding among all peoples in an atmosphere of mutual respect. By reappropriating the original function of communication at the service of the community, Mail Art clearly opened the door to the kind of interactivity that is now boasted by Net Art"[1]. With these words, Clemente Padín (Lascano, Rocha, Uruguay, 1939), poet, graphic designer, multimedia performer and active participant in the Mail Art movement since the end of the 1960s, summarises the role of this trend of artistic expression as a forerunner of net.art. Whereas in the 1950s and 1960s Mail Art mainly represented a closed circuit of communication between intellectuals of the art world, under the very immediate influence of its creator Ray Johnson, towards the end of the 1960s it starts to incorporate the concept of Eternal Network [2] created around 1968 by the Fluxus artist, Robert Filliou (1926-1987) to express a model of permanent and collaborative creation that would be open to everyone. Many *mailartists* adopt this utopian project regarding the continuous expansion of worldwide communications through all expressive forms

and mediums of aesthetic production, to the extent that the term Eternal Network came to be used to refer to Mail Art as such.

Born with the aim of eliminating the existing distance between the artist and the public, and in general, between art and life, the Eternal Network concept rejects the exclusivity of the art world's institutions in order to espouse open and collaborative exchanges through the postal services. Towards the end of the 1960s and the early 1970s a geographically disperse community of networkers (artists in a network) establishes itself, promoting an anti-bureaucratic counterculture that is also anti-hierarchical, transnational and global. According to the Hungarian mailartist and art critic Pernecky, *"the purpose behind the network was not to establish a system of contacts through the postal services (as might be suggested superficially) but rather to create a homogenous chain of communications in which all of the components are equal, doing away with the market laws as well as the traditional dichotomy between the artist and the public"*[3].

These goals implied a series of operational guidelines which were adopted the increasing number of Mail Art exhibits as of 1970: no fees are levied for participation; there are no juries nor selection processes and all pieces, sent by mail, are exhibited; the documentation is sent to all collaborators (the recipients are required to acknowledge receipt by sending a list of participants or a catalogue with the addresses) and no piece is returned nor marketed [4].

Equally fundamental are the pioneering publications in the promotion of Mail Art, which served as an alternative space for exhibits, as a medium to call for the participation in projects and as sources for the diffusion of lists of participants' addresses (lists that helped to expand the network increasing the possibilities of contact between individuals). In countries where the access to printing and publishing technology was limited (such as in Latin America and Eastern