

Essay

The Paradox Of Media Activism

The Net is Not a Tool,
It's an Environment

Franco Berardi Bifo

Media in general, and particularly the Internet, are often considered as instruments. This is theoretically legitimate, but such a definition can be useful only in a very narrow and obvious way. Obviously, media accomplish the task of making communication possible and conveying information – and obviously, the faster and more widespread they are the better, for the purposes of message circulation. Furthermore, we can also obviously say that the Internet and digital media in general possess a force of penetration that was unknown to the printed media of the past – and this makes it difficult, although not impossible, for established powers to control and to censor their messages.

Errorist Kabaret,
Etcetera Archive,
2011, installation view,
IKSV- Istanbul Biennial.
Courtesy of the artists.



But this kind of consideration does not go beyond the surface of the change that has been produced by the evolution of the Internet, particularly by the recent diffusion of social networks. If we want to go beyond the platitude that (obviously) information makes it possible for us to be informed, we must start from an awareness that the Internet is not essentially an instrumental tool, but is essentially a sphere, an environment, and therefore the anthropological mutation produced by digital media and by the acceleration of the Infosphere is the most relevant effect from the point of view of social and political effects.

Following the recent explosion of revolt in the Arab world, and – more or less simultaneously – in Europe and in the United States, regardless of the different contexts and goals of movements like the Tunisian-Egyptian revolt of Spring 2011, the Spanish *acampada* or the New York Occupy Wall Street movement, political commentators and media-theorists have argued about the role of new media in the emerging of social movements. The opinions have diverged on a crucial point: some of them have appreciated the role of new media as a force for democratic expression and liberation of intellectual energies of the people, while some have observed that media can be a tool for the infiltration of power's ideology and control.

Some of them have emphasised the progressive function that social networks – namely Facebook – have played in the organisation of movements against authoritarianism in Egypt and against financial dictatorship in Spain.

For instance, in *The Political Power of Social Media Technology*, an essay published in *Foreign Affairs* in February 2011, Clay Shirky argues that:

'As the communications landscape gets denser, more complex, and more participatory, the networked population is gaining greater access to information, more opportunities to engage in public speech, and an enhanced ability to undertake collective action'.

From these (obvious) considerations, Shirky draws the conclusion that the ubiquity and horizontality of new media constitutes an opportunity for the liberation movements. About the events of Tahrir Square, he writes:

'This is it. The big one. This is the first revolution that has been catapulted onto a global stage and transformed by social media'.

Shirky's angle is not exactly the same of the movements', as his crucial concern is the interest of US foreign policy, as explicitly he asks:

'How does the ubiquity of social media affect U.S. interests, and how should U.S. policy respond to it?'

In any case, his persuasion that new media plays an unequivocally emancipatory role, and that the diffusion of information is *ipso facto* promoting democracy, is widely shared. Some of the most influential

techno-philosophers like Pierre Lévy (author of many books that in the 1990s played an important role in the creation of a philosophical framework for the understanding of digital media) have fostered the idea that the creation of the Net also creates the condition for the boundless deployment of the collective intelligence.

But in the real world, the development of social movements in the last year has revealed a more contradictory situation, as the weight of cultural identities and social interests has often prevailed. Look at the Egyptian evolution 18 months before the so-called 'Arab Spring': the Egyptian upheaval defeated and chased out the tyrant Hosni Mubarak, but not the tyranny itself. On the contrary, in the long run what we see is the creation of a double-headed tyranny: the authoritarian army and the Muslim Brotherhood grappling for political power, but finally managing together to subdue the movement of factory workers and libertarian intellectuals.

Notwithstanding the leading role of the libertarian movement that occupied Tahrir Square from the beginning and spread out the message of revolution thanks to social networks, in the second phase of the process, the power of religious belonging has taken the upper hand.

Critical commentators like Evgeny Morozov have argued against this new media optimism, and (in *The Net Delusion: The Dark Side of Internet Freedom*) have underlined that fact that new media also plays into the hands of power. In Morozov's view, we should not expect corporations like Google to be favourable to processes of liberation from the power of corporations. Google did business in China for four years before economic conditions and censorship demands – not human rights concerns – forced it out.

In my opinion, we should not refer only to the political effects – opinion, ideological persuasion, contents of information flows – nor should we limit ourselves to a critique of the policy of techno-corporations. We should not analyse the media as if they were only the instruments for the implementation of social interests and political agendas. We should not presuppose the existence of an already structured subject behind or inside the info-machine. The subject is not pre-existing, it is rather the outcome of the actual working of the info-machine.

The most important effect of the media (and particularly of new media) is the anthropological mutation and disposition of bodies in the social sphere.

Already in the year 1993, the Canadian sociologists Arthur Kroker and Robert Weinsten in the book *Data Trash: The Theory of the Virtual Class* criticised the techno-optimism raging in those years and observed that the Information Highway was not really enhancing the space of freedom, but only optimising the markets, and concluded: 'more information less meaning'.

This is a crucial point that has been increasingly exposed by the developments of the Net, particularly by the emergence of the

Web 2.0. The passage from the first to the second decade in the history of the Net is all about band broadness, and consequently about speed. The amount of information that users can receive is infinitely larger than the amount of information they can consciously process and critically elaborate. This is provoking an effect of information overload, and of anxiety, and many times of panic. The psychopathology of speed information is not to be considered as a marginal side-effect of the process, as it is essential in the shaping of social attention and finally of the social mind.

Both Shirky and Morozov, the optimist technophile and the critical analyst of technology, insist on considering the Internet and the media in general as a tool, an instrument for carrying contents – what they are, of course. But this is a narrow way of understanding the role of the media, because media are not only a tool but also and mainly an environment, whose effects largely differ and disregard political contents and conscious intentions.

The main effect of this info-acceleration is a form of subjection to the flow that makes more and more difficult the slow individual elaboration of meaning and the creation of moments of singularity.

In this vein, Geert Lovink's approach (in *Networks without a cause: A Critique of Social Media*) is more useful to the understanding of the effects of new media, as Lovink considers them not only from the point of view of their political content, but also their anthropological content, questioning their cultural and psychological effects. Lovink considers social networks as an environment whose effects are not only in the field of information and ideological persuasion, but mostly in the field of privatisation of daily life and isolation of psychological habits.

The acceleration in fact is producing an effect of automation in the processes of interpretation and in the processes of social construction, so that we are taken in a frenzy of 'friending', 'liking' and 'commenting', as we are unable to create an autonomous sphere of expression in our info-saturated lives.

In the new dimension of the social network, desire is diverted from physical contact and invested in the abstract field of simulated seduction, in the infinite space of the image. Boundless enhancement of disembodied imagination leads to the virtualisation of the erotic experience, and the infinite flight from an object to the next.

Value, money, financial excitement: these are the perfect forms of this virtualisation of desire. The permanent mobilisation of psychic energy in the economic sphere is simultaneously the cause and the effect of the virtualisation of contact. The very word 'contact' comes to mean exactly the contrary of what it means: not bodily touch, epidermic perception of the sensuous presence of the other, but purely intellectual intentionality, virtual cognisability of the other. It is hard to predict what sort of mutation is underway in the long run of human evolution. As far as we know, this virtual investment of desire is currently provoking a pathogenic effect of fragilisation of social solidarity and a stiffening of empathic feeling.

Social movements have been able to use new media as a tool for the enhancement of social consciousness, but if we consider new media as a new public sphere, we are obliged to acknowledge that their role is much more controversial. Obviously, this new space is intensifying the possibilities of virtual gathering, but they are also accentuating the un-empathic condition of the precarious generation, and therefore they are making social solidarity more and more difficult to attain and to build.

Transmitting information and denouncing the misdeeds of power have been important in the past decades. The role of media-activism, as a practice of denouncement of exploitation and unmasking of commercial advertising and political simulation was seen to be important in the 1990s and in the years of the anti-globalisation movement, from the Seattle riots in 1999 to Genoa in 2001.

Neoliberal ideology was an unquestionable dogma before Seattle, after which the action of media-activism has helped to destroy the dogma in the minds of a large part of population. But consciousness and critical stance have been shown to be insufficient if people are unable to actually free themselves from the automatism of power. This is what social activists have understood in recent times, when financial dictatorship has revealed its real face.

Let's look at what is happening in Europe these days.

In Greece and in Spain, in Portugal and also in the United Kingdom, an increasing number of workers and students and citizens at large have understood that, under the label of 'bank rescue' and of 'financial stability', a huge process of predation and privatisation of social resources is underway. The majority of the people are aware of the deadly effects of financial capitalism, as these are crystal clear in the worsening of their working conditions and in the tightening of their revenue, and also because media-activism has helped in the understanding of the regressive game that financial capitalism is playing.

But rage and protest and riots have been shown to be unable to resist this financial aggression, and have exposed their limitations in front of the automatism of financial power. Only a process of active withdrawal from the sphere of capitalist exploitation, and the creation of spaces of autonomous production and exchange (for instance, the creation of community currencies for the disownment of the financial power of the banks) may open the way to a process of emancipation. But a process like this not only requires information and understanding; most of all, it demands solidarity, physical proximity of social actors, territorial organisation of daily life and of armed defense, when necessary, of the spaces of social autonomy.

Solidarity is not a moral value, or a political ideology. It is the empathic perception of the presence of the other, and this is seriously eroded by the virtualisation and mediatisation of social relations.

We should never forget that just after midnight on the 28th of January, 2011, Egypt, a country in which more than 20 million people

were following the events of Tahrir Square online, was essentially cut off from the Internet. The next day, the number of people gathering in the streets of every city in the country exploded, and the revolt became an irrepressible revolution.

Pulling a country of 82 million people, around 17 million Internet users, 60 million cell-phone subscribers, seven million home phones, and five million Facebook users offline created the largest flashmob ever, with around eight million protesters in the streets across Egypt today according to reports.

Media-activism is taken in a paradoxical situation. It is crucial for the creation of social consciousness and the denunciation of fake ideologies of power, and the critical dismantlement of power's discursive machines. But simultaneously – as it involves necessarily online activity and mediatisation of social relations, media-activism is adding noise to the overcrowded Infosphere and further virtualising social relations and attention.

As media-activists, we have to be conscious of this contradiction: although the field of the media still plays a crucial role in the fight for autonomy, we should know that the problem of solidarity and empathy is not a problem of information, but of physical, erotic, therapeutic presence.

Information is no longer a crucial necessity – we have as much information as we need, and much more. What *is* crucial is the ability to activate networks of solidarity outside the sphere of the economy and of representative democracy.

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Franco Berardi Bifo (born 1949) is a writer, media-theorist, and media-activist. He founded the magazine *A/traverso* (1975-81) and was part of the staff of Radio Alice, the first free pirate radio station in Italy (1976-78). Involved in the political movement of Autonomia in Italy during the 1970s, he fled to Paris, where he worked with Félix Guattari in the field of schizoanalysis. Bifo published the books *After the future* (2011), *The Soul at Work* (2010), *Felix* (2001), *Cibernauti* (1994), *Mutazione e Cyberpunk* (1993) and contributed to the magazines *Semiotext(e)*, *Chimères*, *Metropoli*, and *Musica 80*. He is currently collaborating with *e-flux.journal* and is Coordinator of the European School for Social Imagination (SCEPSI). His next book, *Poetry and finance* will be published in November 2012 by *Semiotexte*.