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Alt. vs. Ctrl.

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ALT. VS. CTRL.: EDITORIAL NOTES FOR THE JOPP ISSUE ON ALTERNATIVE INTERNETS

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for the JoPP issue on Alternative Internets

By *Félix Tréguer, Panayotis Antoniadis, Johan Söderberg*

The hopes of past generations of hackers weigh like a delirium on the brains of the newbies. Back in the days when Bulletin Board Systems metamorphosed into the Internet, the world's digital communications networks – hitherto confined to military, corporate and elite academic institutions – were at grasping reach of ordinary individuals. To declare the independence of the Internet from nation states and the corporate world seemed like no more than stating the bare facts. Even encrypted communication – the brainchild of military research – had leaked into the public's hands and had become a tool wielded against state power. Collectives of all stripes could make use of the new possibilities offered by the Web to bypass traditional media, broadcast their own voice and assemble in new ways in this new public sphere. For some time, at least, the Internet as a whole embodied "alternativeness."

Already by the mid-nineties, however, states began to reshape the communications infrastructure into something more manageable. Through a series of international treaties, legislations and market developments, ownership over this infrastructure was concentrated to a few multinational companies (McChesney, 2013). On top of this legal and technical basis, a new breed of informational capitalism sprang up, where value is siphoned from deterritorialized "open" flows (Fuchs, 2015). Meanwhile, the ecological footprint of communication technologies has come to represent a formidable challenge (Flipo et al., 2013).

It is in the light of these transformations that the emancipatory promises inherited from the 1980s and 1990s must be assessed. With every new wave of high-tech products, these promises have been renewed. For instance, when WiFi-antennas were rolled out in the 2000s, community WiFi-activists hoped to rebuild the communications infrastructure bottom-up (Dunbar-Hester, 2014). With the advent of cryptocurrencies, some claimed to believe that bankers' control over global currency flows would be demolished (Karlström, 2014). The technology at hand might be new, but the storyline bundled with it is made up of recycled materials. It basically says: "Technology x has leveled the playing field, now individuals can outsmart the combined, global forces of state and capital."

Underlying this claim is a grander narrative about (information) technology as the harbinger of a brighter future. Although progressivism goes all the way back to the Scientific Revolution, it was given a particular, informational twist during the Cold War. In the 1950s and 1960s, disillusioned US Trotskyists – most notably among them Daniel Bell – rebranded historical materialism as the post-industrialism hypothesis. With this remake of hist-mat, history did no longer culminate in socialism, but in a global consumer village. Furthermore, the motor of transition was not class struggle anymore, but the inert development of technology (Barbrook, 2007). Though a spark of conflict has of course survived in the post-industrial hypothesis, this technological determinism flares up anew every time hackers and Internet activists rally behind, say, the inevitable demise of copyright or the awaiting triumph of decentralised communication networks (Söderberg, 2013). Determinism is performative, and never more so than when it is mobilized in political struggles.

This observation points to the instability of the meanings invested in computers and in the Internet itself. It suffices to recall the twin roots of these technologies, one in the military-industrial complex (Agar, 2003, Edwards, 1996), the other in the counter-culture and peace movement (Turner, 2006; 2013). The same undecidedness prevails today, as exemplified by the global controversies unleashed by NSA whistleblower Edward Snowden. The documents leaked by Snowden revealed the extent to which communications surveillance has been built into the pipes of a supposedly flat network, giving rise to unprecedented mobilisations aimed at resisting it. But paradoxically, this wave of resistance is now leading to the legalisation of mass surveillance (Tréguer, 2016). Because of these persistent ambiguities, it would be as wrong to denounce the inherent oppressiveness of the Internet as it would be to celebrate the alternative essence of this technology. Either position amounts to the same thing: A foreclosing of the struggle in which the future meaning of the technology is determined. Both Alt. and Ctrl. are possible and competing scenarios. They evolve in constant interaction.

How can we, as scholars and/or activists, sort out this complexity and make an assessment of the balance of forces, while reinvigorating hope for the future? Can we learn from the past to ward off the eternal return of a dystopian future? Posing these questions – and perhaps

contributing to answers – is the task that we have set for ourselves in this special issue of Journal of Peer Production on “alternative Internets.”

If the meaning of the “Internet” is instable, then the definition of “alternative” in “alternative Internets” is even more so. Alternativeness is never an absolute. It is relative to something else, the non-alternative, which must also be defined. In this respect, Paschal Preston notes that alternative Internets were found in online applications that “manage to challenge and resist domination by commercial and other sectional interests”, in particular those “operating as alternative and/or minority media for the exchanges of news and commentary on political and social developments which are marginalized in mainstream media and debates” (Preston, 2001). Likewise, Chris Atton writes that alternative Internets are “produced outside the forces of market economics and the state” (Atton, 2003). As seen from these rather conventional definitions, alternativeness is measured in distance from the centres of state and capital.

How can we move past the couple of “useful others” (the state, the market) to better grasp alternativeness? The tools, applications and media that form part of the Internet can be assessed as composites made up of different dimensions. Some important parameters include the underlying funding and economic models, the governance schemes for taking decisions and allocating tasks, or the modes of production. Nick Couldy puts emphasis on this later dimension when discussing alternative online media, stressing that the most important for them is to challenge big corporate mass media by overcoming “the entrenched division of labour (producers of stories vs. consumers of stories)” (Couldry, 2003:45).

Another crucial line of inquiry for evaluating an alternative Internet relates to the underlying content or ideology that it circulates. For Sandoval and Fuchs, this is the most important dimension, and anything claiming to be alternative must adopt a critical stance to “try to contribute to emancipatory societal transformation” and “question dominative social relations” (Sandoval & Fuchs, 2009). When we consider the Internet, ideology is found in the values that underly the design of a technology or application, structure its uses or populate the online social space that this application brings about.

Of course, ideology is also embedded in the discourses and practices of the many actors trying to influence its development at the technical, social or legal level. The Internet is indeed a social space made up of a myriad of contentious actors such as hackers, software developers and makers who hack, code and make, of advocacy groups with their value-ridden proclamations and legalese, of Internet users making claims to an enlarged citizenship, and of course of all the entrepreneurs, crooks, bureaucrats, agents provocateurs and politicians they fight against or – less often – coalise with. All of these actors produce, use or advocate for particular technologies, fight against or encourage dystopic trends, work towards or oppose emancipatory projects, and in doing so produce political discourses and imaginaries that weigh on the social construction of the Internet. As such, they are part of our field of inquiry when we talk about “alternative Internets.” Their own contradictions further complicate the analysis. A protagonist might go to bed as a subversive hacker but wake up the next day as a piece-rate worker in someone else’s pension plan, or worse.

This speaks to the more general fact that a socio-technical *dispositif* that is “alternative” on one level tends to be preconditioned by *status quo* on some other level. For instance, openness in terms of software licenses often comes hand in hand with a closure in terms of technical expertise. To put it in more general terms, the alternative, if it is to be effective, is necessarily compromised by the dominant. Here as elsewhere, a maximising strategy is paralysing: As the proverb goes, “the perfect is the enemy of the good.” In this spirit, Marisol Sandoval and Christian Fuchs have argued for “politically effective alternative media that in order to advance transformative political can include certain elements of capitalist mass media” (Sandoval & Fuchs, 2009:147). According to the authors, subscription fees or even advertising might be required if a project is to break out of the niche to reach a broader audience. Assessing trade-offs is part of the alternative game.

In this issue of the JoPP, we present contributions that explore these questions and shed light on the blind spots of alternative Internets.

With “[In Defense of the Digital Craftsman](#),” James Losey and Sascha D. Meinrath offer a conceptual framework for analyzing control in Internet technical architectures along five dimensions: networks, devices, applications/services, content, and data. By updating prior analysis regarding threats to communicational autonomy and to the ability to tinker with digital technologies, they identify key challenges and help think systematically about strategies of resistance.

Stefano Crabu, Federica Giovanella, Leonardo Maccari, and Paolo Magaudda consider the bottom of the “network” layer of Losey and Meinrath’s framework by analyzing offering an interdisciplinary perspective on Ninux, a network of wireless community networks in Italy. Their paper, “[Hacktivism, Infrastructures and Legal Frameworks in Community Networks: the Italian Case of Ninux.org](#)”, benefits from the active participation of one of the authors in Ninux, and presents interesting evidence about the limited levels of decentralization in a network built exactly around this vision. It is also one of the very few papers that brings insights on the legal aspects of community networks, focusing on the question of liability and different organizational forms that can protect these networks against legal actions.

Christina Haralanova and Evan Light offer an insider’s look at a much smaller community network in Montreal, called Réseau Libre. In their paper entitled “[Enmeshed Lives? Examining the Potentials and the Limits in the Provision of Wireless Networks](#),” they try to understand two other important contradictions in community networks. First, they examine their possible role as both an “alternative Internet provider,” as well as an “alternative to the Internet all together,” that is to say a local infrastructure providing local services for the members of the network. They also identify the lack of adequate security against surveillance, despite the fact that many people cite enhanced privacy and

security options as a reason for their participation in the community. As the paper shows, even though they might foster knowledge-sharing around issues such as computer security, these networks remain “as insecure as the Internet itself.”

The paper “[Going Off-the-Cloud: The Role of Art in the Development of a User-Owned & Controlled Connected World](#)” by Daphne Dragona and Dimitris Charitos also explores various alternatives of user-owned network infrastructures, this time focusing on an “alternative to the Internet all together”, imagined and experimented by artists and activists. The scale here is much smaller, with most networks comprised by a single wireless router acting as a hotspot allowing only local interactions between those in physical proximity. Such “off-the-cloud” networks, have been given numerous telling names like Netless, PirateBox, Occupy here, Hot probs, Datafield, Hive networks, Autonomous Cube. According to the authors, these and many more similar inspiring projects work towards “new modes of organization and responsibility (...) beyond the sovereignty of the cloud.”

In “[Gesturing Towards ‘Anti-Colonial Hacking’ and its Infrastructure](#),” Sophie Toupin draws on a historical example to investigate the opportunities and limitations for appropriating cryptography today. Her interviews with some of the key actors in this glorious moment of hacker politics is particularly inspiring, as is Toupin’s willingness to expand our understanding of “hacktivism” by looking beyond Europe and North America.

Primavera De Filippi’s piece focuses on “[The Interplay between Decentralization and Privacy](#),” using blockchain technologies as a case-study. She shows that while decentralized architectures are often key to the design of alternative Internets, they come with important challenges with regards to privacy protection. Her critical assessment is particularly timely, as blockchain technologies are rapidly co-opted by the bureaucratic organizations there were originally meant to subvert.

In “[Finding an Alternate Route: Circumventing Conventional Models of Agricultural Commerce and Aid](#),” Stephen Quilley, Jason Hawreliak and Katie Kish present a case study on Open Source Ecology (OSE). OSE started in the United States but has sprouted similar initiatives in Europe and South America. It is now developing a series of open source industrial machines and publishes the designs online. One of the primary goals of OSE is to provide collaboratively produced blueprints for relatively inexpensive agricultural machinery, such as tractors, backhoes, and compressed earth brick presses for constructing buildings. The authors argue that the proliferation of open source networks can reshape domains that have traditionally relied on state and inter-state actors such as international aid.

Lastly, Melanie Dulong de Rosnay’s experimental text on “[Alternative Policies for Alternative Internets](#)” raises awareness on the importance of the terms of use of Internet platforms. By quoting numerous such policies – from both mainstream and alternative platforms – on topics like copyright or data protection, she manages to create a diverse mix of feelings, all the way from anger to laughter. Most importantly, this collection warns us about the legal issues that alternative platforms have to deal with, and provides inspiration and useful information on how to address them in practice.

Each of these papers addresses one or more of these “layers” described by Losey and Meinrath, analysing different facets of alternativeness. But there are other dimensions outside this framework that we have not touched upon. For instance, although the issue deals with low-tech practice, the staggering ecological impact of Internet technologies and their environmental unsustainability is not addressed, despite the growing attention of scholars and engineers to these crucial issues ([Chen, 2016](#)). Although two papers focus on urban community networks, other aspects of the urban dimension of alternative Internets are overlooked. Together with the notion of locality, urbanity appears to be crucial in helping actualise the potential of alternative Internets to become autonomous infrastructures operating outside the commercial Internet. It is also an avenue to think about resistance strategies: As the urban space becomes increasingly hybrid and renders the digital and physical evermore intertwined, those movements fighting for the “right to the city” ([Lefebvre, 1996](#)) and those working towards the “right to the Internet” will have renewed opportunities to join forces ([Antoniadis & Apostol, 2014](#)).

For sure, advancing alternative Internets will require from a very diverse set of actors to go beyond traditional boundaries so as to engage in effective collaboration. In academia too, transdisciplinary collaboration – though still in its infancy – is extremely promising. We hope that this issue of the JoPP will be read as an invitation to work further in that direction.

As editors, we would like to thank Bryan Hugill for helping us copy-edit the papers, and express our gratitude to both authors and reviewers. We hope that readers will be as inspired as we are by these very diverse contributions, which each in their own ways point towards a more democratic and more inclusive Internet.

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