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Actualize your Imagination as Narrative and as Infrastructure

An interview with Stefania Milan on media, tech and data activism

Stefania Milan / Raimund Minichbauer

***Raimund Minichbauer**: One of the main topics of your research is activism in relation to media and technology, and – in your ongoing project – to data. Could you please briefly explain how you came to work on this topic and sketch out these fields?*

Stefania Milan: I come from activism myself. I started out in the 1990s, and my specialty within those social movements' ecology was so-called "media activism." I was one of the people with some expertise or interest in media production and in being in charge of telling the story of the movement. My interest has always been in how we can tell a different story, based on the conviction that you cannot achieve social change unless you change the imagination of people. You need to exercise a slightly different imagination to think not just about the reality in which we live, but also about the alternatives. In order to do that, you also need to exercise your power of imagination in your own spaces of communication. It is not enough to use the mainstream media, which mainly consisted

of – ok, websites as well, but mainly newspapers, printed press, television and radio back then. It is not enough to convey your story to sympathetic journalists, but it is also very important to exercise your imagination, not just on the level of the narrative, but also on the level of infrastructure. My obsession back then was with the creation of alternative communication infrastructures for social movements. There was a lot happening in those fields – in Europe in particular, but not only here – with a number of alternative Internet service providers, like Riseup[1] in the United States, Autistici/Inventati[2] in Italy or Nadir[3] in Germany. In the beginning, they emerged as Internet cafés in squatted social centers, for example. Then they started to function as Internet service providers in a provisional sense, providing hosting access, e-mail accounts, etc. This was mainly on the local level, but there were also more large-scale experiments, such as Indymedia. One of the activists I interviewed for my book said that Indymedia was the mother of all blogs, because it was the first time that people could publish their stories online on a large scale without any editorial filters. Although, in fact, technically speaking, there were some commercial experiments doing that, but Indymedia brought it to public attention, and it went mainstream within activist circles. These were rather revolutionary experiments, and the importance of all the initiatives, no matter how solid they were from a technological point of view – sometimes the servers were sloppy, sometimes they went offline, etc. – was in the idea of autonomy and self-organization, the creation of prefigurative politics, in really creating the Internet as we want it here and now – not tomorrow.

Things have changed and we should try to capture these changes

This is what I am very much concerned with in my work as a scholar. We are a research collective working on a five-year project

called DATACTIVE.[4] We are academics, but we try to do "research that matters" by engaging research to not only respond to our own questions and needs as researchers – which may be theorizing social reality – but also to intersect with people "on the ground," e.g. to work with researching-activists, meaning activists that are very interested in thinking about the processes in which they are involved. I designed the project in 2013/2014. There was a huge emphasis on big data, and it was exactly after the Snowden revelations, which brought the widespread blanket of monitoring and surveillance by the U.S. National Security Agency and its siblings to public attention. Around that time, I noticed more and more that the groups of media activists, software developers and hackers that I mentioned before – who were interested in the more technological aspects of activism and as such a niche in the social movement scene – increasingly tried to talk to the non-tech savvy people. In fact, all the groups that I mentioned have always been trying to share their knowledge. Everything is organized around knowledge-sharing sessions that try to get more people on board, etc. Traditionally, however, because it is a bit of a dry, distant, highly technical type of activism, not everyone is sympathetic or attracted to it: radical tech activism is not like environmental activism, which resonates with a lot of people. Things changed radically with the Snowden revelations: What these groups had been preaching for ages – that people should watch out, that mobile phones, Google and Facebook are huge surveillance devices – became much more concrete for a number of people following the Snowden revelations. The fact that the Snowden revelations have been discussed in the mainstream media and by mainstream politicians was sort of a blessing for these tech groups. My observation at the time was that things had changed and we should try to capture these changes.

The idea of the DATACTIVE project is essentially to try to understand how people – and by people, I mean both experts, who are more at the forefront of these transformations, and "average citizens," meaning people who have not been exposed to this before – engage with datafication and massive data collection. How do they react to all these challenges, but also to the novel opportunities that may arise? We try to put together two sides of activism: On the one hand, there is what we call "reactive data activism," or how people react to external threats that come from being constantly monitored and who are engaged, for example, in developing and spreading encryption software or trying to interject and obfuscate data collection. We put this together with the more "optimistic" side, so to speak, which we call "pro-active data activism": people and groups that try to take advantage of the possibilities offered by big data, e.g. open data activism, the possibilities offered by the freedom of information legislations that allow citizens to have a glimpse into what the state is doing. These two sides of activism are normally considered two completely different phenomena, and what we are saying is that they are essentially two sides of the same coin. It is still about how activists engage with datafication, and the two should be treated as the same phenomenon and as a sort of continuum.

Moving quickly to your second question: What is the field like today for people who are interested in activism in relation to media and technology, in particular the Internet? For a number of years, sociologists and political scientists interested in social movements have looked at the agency of social movements as if it was completely detached from the communicative dimension. Media and technology were really treated as a sort of black box, something that existed out there, where activists try to talk to journalists, where they try to convey their story, where they try to

be represented. It was like a tool, like a pen, that does not have something like a political economy or any internal dynamics. In my opinion, this has always been a shortcoming of the sociology of social movements in particular. However, over the years, more and more people began studying social movements and activism from the opposite side, starting from the Internet. Phenomena like Occupy or the Arab Spring, the Umbrella Revolution in Hong Kong, all these mobilizations basically came to the attention of people not primarily as social movements, but with a focus on their digital manifestation. So, it is a good time now, because there are many people interested in digital activism and movements. However, there is still a shortcoming in my opinion, and that relates to autonomy and self-organization. In Occupy and the Arab Spring, for example, we observed very little of it and very little interest in it. Social movements are mostly making use of commercial platforms, including and probably mostly Facebook, taking it as a great opportunity, and preferring to reach a critical mass through all those means, as opposed to creating their own alternative media. Of course, there are groups that try to do something different. For instance, in 2012, there was a blog posting published by the Hamburg group *Nadir*, entitled "We Need to Talk about Facebook,"[5] which stated that by putting one's stuff online, by exposing one's social network, one's social graph, one is also jeopardizing the lives and the activism of others.

Reformist and prefigurative

***RM**: You already mentioned that there are these two aspects of contemporary activism: on the one hand, the more reformist and policy-related one with the aim of changing media, technology and data policy, and, on the other hand, the more prefigurative and autonomous aspect of developing something new, of developing alternative structures. How*

are these two aspects delineated, and simultaneously related to one another?

SM: The first aspect means that these groups want to be included in the conversation. When there is, in this very specific language, an "open policy window" they are willing to jump in, activate themselves and try to change the legislation from within: from inside the control room. When you start doing that, you also accept the rules of the game. You might not really believe that these institutions are legitimate, but at least you believe that there is a need to interface with them in order to change policy for the reason that policy creates the conditions for people's interactions online. Policy is perceived as an important aspect, sometimes even at the most radical fringes. A reason why people do that is because they believe that they have some expertise that many other citizens don't have.

Many other groups reject the game. They do not believe that this – as they sometimes call it: puppet theatre – is of any legitimacy. These people are not interested in taking part in the power, because they do not believe in that type of power. They try to redistribute power, diffuse power, and they try to create their own kind of power, which does not mean becoming the new Google, if you will, but actually aiming at distributing as much as possible, decentralizing and controlling technology as much as possible, for example. An example of this is the alternative Internet Server Providers (ISPs) that I mentioned earlier, like Riseup, Autistici/Inventati or Nadir, that are more in the prefigurative, autonomous spectrum, and are often informed by anarcho-syndicalism and represent the most autonomous fringes of the European movements. They simply do not like the game. They do not want to legitimize it, and, therefore, if they can, they do not comply with legislation. For example, in the European Union, for a long

time since 2007, there has been a legislation, the Data Retention Directive, which obliges Internet Service Providers, among others, to retain the metadata of our communications for a certain timeframe which ranges between six months and two years. The timeframe can be decided upon by the respective Member State, but essentially every provider of electronic communications in the EU has to retain the metadata. However, all of these groups decided not to do that, not to log their users' conversations. They want to put sand in the data collection machine, so some of them moved their servers to other countries, for example, Iceland, who are not in the EU, where they do not have to comply with this legislation. The idea is essentially to bypass any existing legislation. They maneuvered themselves into the position of not having to comply or they simply don't care.

The other group is much more co-operative and tries to participate in multi-stakeholder decision-making processes. This is the case of, for instance, the Electronic Frontier Foundation in the U.S. I'll give you an example as to why this approach might be useful. It comes from radio: There is a very interesting group in the U.S. that used to run a radio station called Radio Mutiny (when sailors do not want their captain to govern the ship, it's mutiny). Not surprisingly, it was a pirate station, and they did not want to be legal. They did not care about being legal, but it became important to them to become legalized. In the U.S., you have, for example, a lot of illegal migrants from Mexico, who are "illegal" although they have lived in the country for decades. When the migrants realized that the radio station was illegal, they became afraid of garnering the attention of the authorities and being deported as a consequence. So the radio group realized that all these activities should not just be for illuminated, privileged, educated, white people. Instead, they wanted the radio station to really be open to

everyone, including the communities that *they* wanted to serve, like communities of migrants. Therefore, they had to change their strategies, and what they did was turn into an organization, the Prometheus Radio Project,[6] and they began to lobby. They lobbied the Federal Communications Commission, which is the communications authority of the U.S., to the extent that President Obama eventually signed the Local Community Radio Act in 2011. The Act provides for low-power radio stations to broadcast locally. The Prometheus Radio Project decided that it was imperative to go into policy-making, because that creates the precondition for more participation and would, therefore, enable more and more people to engage in radio-making.

The two aspects – reformist and prefigurative – are often disconnected. Not many activists engage in both, but the two groups collaborate more and more. Back to engagement with data and surveillance, it was the Snowden revelations that sort of "forced" different groups to collaborate a little more closely and to recognize the importance of doing policy advocacy.

***RM**: You mainly analyze this on a transnational level. Could you please briefly explain what the transnational structures are for both strands?*

SM: The reason why we take a transnational perspective is not to dismiss the national level, but because here you are in a realm where everything is transnational: the structure is transnational, activism is transnational, and the activists themselves are very mobile. We could not expect much from national specifications. Now that's only partly true, because with more emphasis on digital rights – in Europe, in particular, we observe different speeds – different countries mobilize with different emphases. For example, Germany and The Netherlands are very much at the forefront of

thinking about digital rights with the general population being much more aware, much more interested. However, countries like Italy, where I come from, really lag behind. We do not have a single digital rights organization at the national level. We have many small and also very strong activist groups, alternative thinkers, amazing stuff, but no organizations that are able to lobby the government consistently in support of digital rights. In that sense, looking at it from the national point of view might even be interesting. In addition, it is also true that for years we have thought of the Internet more in the sense of geography, meaning that the backbones are a transnational infrastructure which follows certain geopolitical patterns, so being in Italy or in The Netherlands does not really change much. We have been proven wrong. For example, for cybersecurity reasons, the Internet has become very nationalized again, as it has always been to a certain extent, but we preferred, also as activists, to ignore that side. And now it is very clear that "cyberspace" is also seen as the fifth battlefield for armies. Things have become of much closer interest for national governments. Another approach to the national level would also be possible: You could expect the state to defend the human rights of its citizens. You could say you have the state as the layer that defends you from the privacy invasions and data usage practices of Google, Facebook, etc. In fact, this is an opportunity, but we have seen very little of that so far. What we have seen, on the contrary, is states trying to surveil even more and actually partnering up with corporations to do so.

***RM**: In your current DATACTIVE project, your group is also developing software tools, e.g. BigBang, "a tool for scientific analyses of open source and Internet governance communities."[7] Could you please tell us how it works – or, as it is still in development, how it is going to work – and which insights you expect to gain with it?*

SM: This all started with an observation of governance discussions, and I briefly have to explain this. Another member of the group, Niels ten Oever, and I have been active participants in the debates and the policy-making within the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN), and Niels also within the Internet Engineering Task Force (IETF). The "Names" in ICANN refer to the domain names like blabla.com, and the IP-addresses are more or less the machine language version of the domain name, which goes under the label of "Numbers." The IETF deals with standards and protocols, so the even more hardcore infrastructural part of the Internet. All in all, the topics discussed are rather technical, but we mobilized ourselves. It was a sort of activism.

The multi-stakeholder decision-making model

Internet governance discussions follow the so-called "multi-stakeholder decision-making model." It means that every stakeholder, that means everyone who has a stake in an issue, can participate. Everyone, including Internet users, is empowered to have a say concerning the way in which the logical infrastructure of the Internet is managed. And Internet governance is also very transparent, especially if compared to other fields like environmental governance or industrial governance: all discussions are recorded and made publicly available or they take place in public mailing lists.

***RM**: In which form could an average Internet user like me participate?*

SM: It works very simply: You go to the website icann.org, for example, where you can sign up and apply to become a member of a user constituency. If you are a commercial Internet user, that's another story, but let's take the perspective of a citizen which

translates to “non-commercial Internet user.” There is a specific “constituency” (group of interest), and the biggest of the three groups is the “Non-Commercial Stakeholder Group” (NCSG).[8] It is easy to become a member: The website prompts you to reply to a few questions just to make sure that you are not a commercial player who is trying to hijack the non-commercial discussion – and then you become part of this very interesting and very crazy group of about 500 people who are trying to have a say in this field. You can participate in a number of mailing lists, where discourse evolves, perspectives are exchanged, and people fight over how things should look. You can also go to conferences, where decisions are made and where you can literally walk in, register with your e-mail address and your name and participate in any discussion. Right now, a topic is discussed, which is very important for Internet users, the reform of what is called "WHOIS."[9] WHOIS is a global database of contact information of every domain name registrant. For example, I have my website stefaniamilan.net, therefore, I have registered the domain name in my name, and everyone who goes to WHOIS can find all the information about me. I use a privacy proxy, so I can hide some of this information – for which I have to pay – but otherwise my private address, my private phone numbers, etc. would be visible online. For example, if I engage in some controversial activism or live in a country where my right to self-expression is not respected, people can track me down, come to my house and beat me up. We as civil society are trying to reform the WHOIS in a way that protects the privacy of the users, whereas the law enforcement side, but also many among the industry partners, are trying to get as many details from this global database as possible.

Modern day agora or private living room?

The multi-stakeholder decision-making process has rightly been praised, because it is extremely empowering for a number of people and organizations, but there are two problems: The first problem is that having access and participating “on equal footing” does not actually or necessarily mean that you are really empowered to participate. The industry has a number of lobbyists, who specialize and spend 24 hours a day on this. On the side of civil society, luckily there are some NGOs that do amazing work, like the Association for Progressive Communications,[10] the Electronic Frontier Foundation,[11] Article 19,[12] and so on. However, people like me try to find the time, but we don’t have enough resources, and all in all it is still an unequal fight. So multi-stakeholder participation is a bit of an illusion, although with ICANN in particular, it has been implemented nicely.

The second problem is of a different nature. When we operate on Facebook, Facebook is basically the private living room of Mark Zuckerberg. It is not like a public infrastructure, like a public park or a public square, where people can pass by and things are regulated by institutions like human rights or the law of the respective country. If the law says "no hate speech," well, we are not supposed to engage in hate speech and we are not supposed to beat up other people, etc. There are some rules, if you will, in the square, in the park. We are familiar with those. They have been in place for a long time, and there are some checks and balances: If I come and beat you up, I am arrested. If I engage in hate speech, I am fined, etc. There are mechanisms that are typical for a democracy, for participation and for having a voice. When we move to the space of Facebook – or Instagram, Google, you name it – what essentially happens is that we operate in the private living room of the owners of this infrastructure. We are entertaining ourselves. It is nice, because we can communicate with other

people for free, but in fact we are the product, and, essentially, the owner of the space is asking us to respect his rules. For example, if you come into my house, I ask you to take off your shoes. When we come to Mark Zuckerberg's living room, he asks us, for example, not to post pictures of nipples and breasts. And he is absolutely entitled to do so, because it is his private living room. We tend to forget that, and we tend to think that Facebook is a public sort of modern day agora, which it definitely is not. When it comes to the problem of multi-stakeholder governance, the governance works very well when we want to regulate infrastructures of the Internet which are public/private. There are states operating there. There are international organizations such as ICANN operating there. We can operate there with the multi-stakeholder decision-making model and try to steer the Internet into growing and developing in a way that is respectful of human rights. It is a big battle, but we are doing it. However, this is a critical infrastructure which has a completely different legal status than Facebook. Concerning Facebook, we cannot decide what the rules and the terms of service are by applying the multi-stakeholder decision-making model. We see a lot of excitement about the multi-stakeholder model, but unfortunately it is not fit for the challenges of the Internet as we know it today,[13] the highly privatized Internet of social media platforms. We should have more multi-stakeholder decisions when it comes to Facebook as well, but as you can imagine, social media companies are not particularly in favor of this, because it would mean that we could end up creating the rules for their living rooms.

Coming back to the *BigBang* software and why we developed it. We want to study the governance of data flows, the Internet governance debate, and we want to take a critical approach. For example, I wrote about how radical tech activists are left out of

these mechanisms,[14] which is a pity because they are the ones that developed a lot of the Internet as we know it, yet they are out of the discussions about its future. This is partly because the rules of engagement are a bit at odds with their own setup, but also because they are in a way part of those prefigurative autonomous groups which I mentioned before, who prefer to find technical fixes to surveillance rather than changing the laws of surveillance.

The ethics of big data analyses

I still have an interest in understanding how all this is managed, because policy creates the conditions for activism to operate and emerge, and very often policy decisions are invisible and very distant from activists and from people in general. To observe what is going on, you can look at it by going there and participating, which I have done for about three years, but most of these discussions are publicly available – conferences are recorded, or discussions take place in public mailing lists – but how do you study this amazing amount of data? That's where *BigBang* comes in. We were looking in Amsterdam for software that would allow us to study the emergence of discourses on a particular mailing list within Internet governance. In the process, we found an amazing computer scientist and activist, Sebastian Benthall, who was developing this software and we took it under our aegis. We wanted to make sure that no university would try to copyright it, so we took it over to DATACTIVE. By developing it within DATACTIVE, we can keep it open. The idea is to develop a number of codebooks to do analyses of discourse and interaction on mailing lists, as well as on the software repository Github, in order to study the evolution of discourse and of communities. The software is in development. It is open source, and once it is stabilized we want to make it available to the research community,

but also to activists themselves in case people want to do the same type of analyses. At the same time, we are very mindful of the risks associated with this. As I mentioned earlier, Facebook might be bad for social movements because it gives up every detail about people's social networks. Similarly, analyzing social realities with computational means might also be bad for activists. Therefore, we have also and are further working on ethical protocols. No matter how public this material is – as a participant of these mailing lists, you know that this is publicly archived – we want to give the ethical side of the story quite some thought. The idea is to also contribute to thinking about the ethics of big data analysis, because we see very little of it. We see a lot of data mining done, for example, on Facebook and Twitter – think about Cambridge Analytica, who did it for very questionable goals, but also many academics often, perhaps not consciously and not willingly, participate in similar actions that expose citizens and activists to surveillance. Thinking about ethics is also about raising awareness within academia, and we think that activists and civil society may not be very mindful of that either.

***RM**: In your book, which was published in 2013, and again in 2016, **[15]** you ask the question of whether activism related to media and technology could be considered a social movement, and your answer was in a way: "not really, but…", a situation for which you use the picture of a karst river, which "typically disappears underground, to spring up again in a different location with more favorable environmental conditions. Its transitory nature, however, does not alter the fact that it is indeed a river, even if when it resurfaces it might take a different name." Now, five years later, would you say that the situation has changed or is it still the same?*

SM: What I saw five years ago was a network of people that would surface – and that is where the karst river metaphor comes from –

for specific occasions. For example, there is a data retention legislation and then people come together and discuss things. Now the occasions for coming together have literally multiplied. For example, the Chaos Communication Congress has always been there, but it has grown massively, with many more people that gather in Germany at the end of the year to discuss these topics. They are mostly techies, hackers, nerds if you will, but there are more and more other people who want to learn and join the conversation. Another example is a series of conferences called RightsCon,[16] which is quite mainstream, a sort of "Silicon Valley meets human rights" so to speak. This has also become an important occasion for a lot of digital rights activists to meet. Another one is the “Internet Freedom Festival,”[17] which takes place in Valencia every year.

My focus was also mainly on the people working on technical alternatives. As I said, I would like to see more of those, but they still exist and there is also funding and support available through the Open Technology Fund,[18] or the Centre for the Cultivation of Technologies[19] in Berlin, which are trying to support these groups. Essentially, what we observe is more occasions to come together, and more groups and individuals that mobilize over what we might call "Internet freedoms" or digital rights. So, yes, I think we can talk about a social movement. Sociologically speaking, we are still in between that and a karst movement definition, but from the point of view of self-perception, if you ask people, they are going to say: yes, there is a digital rights movement, and it is transnational, and it is powerful and it is beautiful. It is still relatively limited in a way. It tries to articulate itself in relation to other struggles, for example, human rights defenders, but you still see quite some distinction between the tech-minded and the less

techie individuals, whereby the tech-minded are still very much offering services to the lesser experts.

It is still a movement composed of highly educated, predominantly male individuals, and it has been under crossfire over the last couple of years, because a number of its prominent exponents have been taken down for sexual harassment. The movement is very much based on a celebrity rock star culture, because expertise is very important. So, if you are a good developer, if you are a good speaker, you become central and can also sometimes gain power. This has its own problems, and people are trying to counteract the issue of sexual harassment, and the issue of female presence is increasingly debated. There is a discussion within the community – people tend to call it a "community" rather than a "movement." At the recent Internet Freedom Festival in Valencia, which took place in March 2018, there was a lot of it. There was a code of conduct. There was an explicit attempt to discuss this problem of sexual harassment from within the community. So people are trying to also behave like a movement – taking care of each other, reflecting and engaging the meta-reflection of what the movement is about, as opposed to just madly trying to fix bugs in software and responding to the needs of the field. In that sense, we have a movement. But there is something that I see, and not only me, as very beneficial, which is articulating the difference and the role of this community vis-à-vis the rest of activism, and there is still a lack of this. It takes time, but it has definitely changed for the better.

Social media and collective action

RM: *Another main field of your research is the role of social media in protests. At the beginning of this decade, the protest movements from the*

Arab Spring to 15M in Spain and the Occupy Movement, often termed as Twitter or Facebook revolutions, triggered a lot of research interest. You developed your own concept, "cloud protesting," to describe and analyze the impact of social media on collective action and protest movements. Could you please briefly explain the term?

SM: I was living in Toronto when Occupy emerged in 2012. There was a small Occupy camp. I was also spending some time there, and when it was evicted at one point, I went there. I come from a more radical fringe of social movements, and it was strange for me to observe that the eviction was a very smooth process, whereby the waste management was collecting everything – tents, placards, all the beautiful things that people had built over the months – to throw away, discard and destroy. The only thing people were doing, besides jumping a little bit, was taking pictures and spreading the news via social media. I thought: Well, this is weird. They don't try to talk to the cops, but they try to talk to the cops through an audience of people that is not even here. Of course, I knew Twitter and Facebook, etc., but visibly seeing this happening with people looking at screens and not at their surroundings was really weird. Well, it got me thinking about the excitement for how social media empowers people, but as we know and mentioned before: social media is also a form of social control. They are a gigantic Big Brother. So, how is organized collective action changing with the possibilities of commercial social media? My work on "cloud protesting" tries to reflect on this by emphasizing the algorithmic bias in social media, not just looking at the beautiful aspects in a way, but trying to also understand the hidden materiality of devices and platforms. In fact, we believe that what we see in the Facebook Newsfeed is sort of a faithful representation of reality, whereas we know that it is in fact slightly different. It is altered by algorithms of which we know very little. The nexus to

the cloud is deliberate. The reason for the "cloud" is, first of all, that it does not make sense to talk about just one platform. Facebook is widely used, but Facebook does not exist in isolation. It is an ecosystem of surveillance and exploitation within data capitalism. The Cambridge Analytica case also shows that: It was not just Facebook involved in this. Cambridge Analytica is the government, a number of other actors and industrial players in particular. Talking about the cloud allows me to start from what I see as a big contradiction in contemporary activism, which you can see also with Occupy. These are movements or “mobilizations,” as I prefer to call them, that want to be very horizontal, very leaderless. Think about, for example, mechanisms such as the “human microphone,” whereby people really made an effort to listen to each other in the absence of the technical infrastructure to do so. So the movement is really actively trying to be participatory and horizontal, but to mobilize and talk to the bystanders and potential activists and institutions, it uses platforms that are exactly the opposite, that are centralized and proprietary, and that counteract all the values that the activists have. Cloud computing is essentially the same. All of us can access software and storage space that is cheap, accessible on the move and so on. The narrative of cloud computing is a narrative of empowerment, access and horizontality, whereas it is essentially about centralization and control. I wanted to put this contradiction in cloud computing at the center of my question of how activism has changed. This, for me, is one of the biggest problems with activism today. Cambridge Analytica and Snowden made a lot of activists reflect on it, but I would like to see more of that.

The Leica revolution?

***RM**: In one of your texts on the topic, you wrote that the movements of the time were "not sufficiently preoccupied with the infrastructure, contrary to their predecessors," and: "It is worth noting that there are elements of the recent waves of mobilizations that still favor non-proprietary and privacy-aware platforms."[20]*

SM: Well, in a way, the media ecosystem was simpler in the past. Think about the 60s, the 70s, the 90s. What you had was a few television channels, a few printed magazines and newspapers and a few radio stations. It was very clear that as a social movement you did not have a voice. There were the street protests, the gigantic street protest against the G8 or the big peace demonstrations against the war in Iraq. There were several hundreds of thousands of people in the streets in some cases, yet the media representation of it was minimal. They would basically ignore it, and if it was impossible to ignore it, they would focus on the marginal fringes where a car was set on fire, or a trash bin or where there were fights. So people sensed very clearly that they were misrepresented, and they also knew very well that if they wanted to be recognized as legitimate players talking to the state and aiming at some reforms, they had to be recognized as being an important force, and in order to do that, representation in the media was crucial. Therefore, we always tried to get to the media in one way or the other, talking to sympathetic journalists, etc. In a way, the inequality there regarding access and the unfairness in the representation of the movement was *so* clear, and it was right in everyone's eyes. That is how Indymedia was created. It was created to communicate in our own terms. The slogan of Indymedia was: "Don't hate the media, become the media." So: create your own infrastructure, go by yourself. It worked very beautifully in fact. Now, with the advent of social media, things have changed dramatically. The platforms on which we can broadcast ourselves as

individuals and groups have mushroomed, and we have the impression that they are everywhere. As we know, there is also a lot of noise and our voices probably also get lost in the mess, but we have the impression that we can say whatever crosses our mind, both as groups and as individuals. I can say what I am wearing today. I can show you on Instagram what I am eating today, etc. Also, if I am politically-minded: for example, a video of a protest on YouTube allows me to potentially reach many more viewers than if I add it on Indymedia. So, progressively, this also marked the end of Indymedia as the large experiment it used to be. It still exists in some countries, but it is very marginal today. The reason is that people, and movements as well, live under the illusion that they are much more listened to. If you look at the case of the Arab Spring, all these, what we term, "revolutions" – sadly as we have seen, they were no revolutions, they were uprisings that, probably with the exception of Tunisia, did not have much of a long-lasting consequence of systemic effect. What happened back then... There is a principle in journalism, which is proximity: I care about something as a viewer, as a reader, if I relate to it in one way or another, if it resonates with my own experience. So, talking about a “Twitter revolution” would allow this to also be news for Twitter users. In a way, this is not my idea, but there were people who wrote about it, for example:[21] We got to know about and have seen a lot of pictures from the 1917 Mexican revolution, because there were some photographers, including some U.S. photographers, artists, amazing people, who went there and took a lot of pictures, but no one ever named it the “Leica revolution” or anything like that. But it is the same story. As we know very well about the Arab Spring – these were uprisings that did not come out of the blue. And as we know, in many cases there was an Internet blackout. In many of these countries, there are huge problems with digital devices and people did not have access to it,

so in some cases Twitter had only minimally been used. It was more our own reading that attributed the character of something to these uprisings that would resonate with our experience. The story was slightly different with Occupy.

The situation today is that we have lost to some extent the familiarity with the writings of thinkers like Gramsci or Chomsky, the idea of the organic intellectual, the idea of the industry of consensus, etc. Some of our cultural references have died – I hate to say it, but let's face it, they are old – and we failed to spread the news about it, to preserve a collective memory about it, because we have taken all of them – because they were central to us – for granted. Activists, of course, want to not only talk to the illuminated or the converted, they want to preach to everyone, and Facebook definitely allows you to do that, but there are a lot of downsides, some of which we have already mentioned here. That critical approach has been lost, and unfortunately academics have also played a role in that, because there has been – especially from Silicon Valley, from Stanford – humanist studies talking about "liberation technologies," literally saying: Facebook, Twitter, all of this is "liberation technology." Whereas I personally prefer to talk about "liberat*ed* technologies," which emerge out of social movements.[22] Things like Facebook might occasionally also mysteriously contribute to liberating people, but there is essentially nothing there about liberation. Facebook is a private firm. It doesn't matter if we think of it as today's agora, it is not, and we were never in fact promised that it would be. Mark Zuckerberg may also host revolutionaries if he wants to, but the moment he does not like what they have to say, he can kick them out.

Something got lost along the way. We failed in preserving the memory, in passing it to the younger generations, but the media environment has also changed so much. People are raised into this

language and vision of “empowerment” and “freedom of expression” for everyone. My hope is that with cases like Cambridge Analytica now or also with critical projects that people eventually assume a more conscious approach. There is still the issue of critical mass. Where do you meet the people? Is it just activism for the converted, or do you also want to reach others? If you leave Facebook, where do you go, and how do you convince everyone to follow you?

I don’t care so much whether it gets to the media or not

***RM**: How do you see the role of social media from a distance now? I had the impression that there was a lot of research in general on the immediate role of social media in the protests, but not about the mid-term effects, e.g., what remained after the end of the Occupy movements in the streets. Or, if nothing remained, what does that tell us?*

SM: To start from "what is left of the revolutions": I am also very much interested in the individual dimension. I don’t care so much whether it gets to the media or not. Well, a certain type of mediatic success is important to spread the word, having people talk about it, etc., but essentially what remains is what you have changed. What remains on an individual level, on a group local level, is whether you as an individual who has participated in a protest or in a mobilization are empowered. Are you empowered? Has this changed you from being someone who, for instance, did not have much political agency to someone who feels like s/he is exercising his/her citizenship and human rights and has a say? The process of getting to care about things, which is typically left over from participating in social movements, is an immense resource that people can also spread to their workplaces, their families, their groups of friends, and that changes them in a fundamental way

which might not be apparent in the media narrative, but that is what is eventually going to remain. I have not studied the Arab Spring as such, but I have read about it, and in my own personal analyses of it without having any empirical data, what seems to be left behind is not systemic change, but more a matter of individual change. I am empowered as a citizen. I didn't have a say before. I found many others who came to the streets with me. We can revitalize community dynamics. We can operate on the local level to change the way things are done. And all these people may eventually be ready when the revolution comes – if it comes.

RM: *A lot of empirical knowledge has been produced concerning the role of social media for protests. What could be learned from all that for, e.g., a Facebook alternative?*

SM: There is a decent number of alternatives to social media, but the problem is that there is no critical mass around them. To maintain social movements, two functions of media are necessary. The most fundamental one is: How do we organize with each other? Mailing lists have done a great job for a long time. Now Signal and WhatsApp are probably doing that, so more a personal connection and more on a local scale. It is the sort of "behind the scenes" type of organization, which is finally opened to others when they are accepted by the activists. Then there is the more broadcasting phase or function, which is: how do we get people involved? How do we get our story out? How do we get policy-makers to care? This is very important for what I mentioned at the beginning of our conversation – about vision, imaginaries, discourse change, essentially a norm change. How do we alter the discourse about what is legal or illegal today, for example? This is a very important discussion to have, and, of course, it has to happen in the open, and it has to be as inclusive and as accessible as possible. These are the two functions, and they don’t have to be

performed by the same infrastructure. People have tried to use Facebook for both, e.g., within Black Lives Matter. There is a lot of organizing through WhatsApp and through more kind of one-to-one communication channels. I don't have a solution in the form of saying which specific platform is what we need. What we probably need is a multifaceted strategy anyway, whereby we keep some communication – the organizational communication – more protected and sealed off, because one doesn't want the cops to know all the strategies, right? And we might want to protect the identities of the activists. We might want to be on Facebook also to talk to people, with more people mindful of the fact that Facebook alters our messages, but also of the fact that by participating in Facebook, we participate and contribute to digital surveillance capitalism. We are criticizing it, but also feeding it with our data. At the same time, we might also want to create alternatives, and to get as many people onto an alternative platform as possible. There are many experiences with that. For instance, Riseup has been developing something called Crabgrass,[23] which is actually a social media platform that is not designed for people to post pictures of their cats and their food, but for self-organization purposes. This is probably a multifaceted strategy that does not shy away entirely. I don't think that today, in 2018, we can completely shy away and hide from commercial platforms, because we would unfortunately miss a lot of people who live there, and that would bring us back to square one in not being able to communicate to people. At the same time, looking at the last three months in counting, Facebook has actually reported profits, which are growing, so it seems that nobody cares about Cambridge Analytica. People are actually not changing their practices. They are still there. They are still feeding the machine. We should make sure to reach people, but we should also make sure to mold those people into having a critical approach.

Beyond Silicon Valley "alternatives"

***RM**: Just recently, I read in the news[24] that a Silicon Valley investor started a competition to single out seven startup projects that develop large-scale privacy-aware Facebook alternatives to start the process of replacing Facebook by a service "that is actually good for society." The investor is, among others, an early investor in Uber, and we can imagine that the solution might be more of the same thing. Are there any – transnational or international – structures that could be capable of developing (and implementing) a political solution to the Facebook & co. problem other than investor solutions like this one?*

SM: I have not seen this news yet, but I am not surprised. We are consumers. Users are consumers. Frankly, after what I just said about Facebook's profits being on the rise, maybe consumers are not that worried about privacy. It does not surprise me, because that is what commercial players do. They try to anticipate and to intercept our desires and our needs. The problem is that data capitalism and surveillance capitalism is not Facebook being mean. It is a business model that makes the platform viable. If you get Silicon Valley trying to find alternatives to Facebook, they will try to find a slightly different business model, but still a profitable business model. It will not be a charity Silicon Valley player that is so nice and will empower the world to start a revolution. There might be angel investors in the beginning, but the beautiful startup that received the money has to prove it is successful if it is to survive beyond one or two years. How are they successful? Surprise, surprise: by selling user data. There may be other models, for instance, that are being discussed also regarding Facebook: The service is free of charge, but there could be a premium service where you pay a monthly fee, and then you get more of the product and maybe not everyone gets your data, but only some

players. There might be a slightly different, slightly adapted business model, but at the moment that you involve capital, it is going to be about profit. There are slightly better platforms, and we have seen that following Snowden, e.g., WhatsApp went encrypted, which it had not been before that. There might be slightly different models, but basically, when you have centralized powers, you will always have centralized services and centralized data management plants. I am not a blockchain expert, but it promises to provide a decentralized trust system that allows everyone to host some data without anyone having the whole picture. The problem again is, how you get people to buy in and to migrate to other services? I don't know current numbers regarding Facebook, but if profits are on the rise, it means that the advertisers haven't left and they still believe that Facebook has a future.

***RM**: Going beyond other private investors, could alternatives develop on a transnational level?*

SM: Well, we do have the European Union, which acts through anti-trust legislation, and currently through the General Data Protection Regulation, which is good, but not perfect. At least we have a player that is quite mindful of human rights, privacy and data protection. The point that I made earlier about multi-stakeholder governance is that so far when it comes to the Internet, it is possible to regulate it beautifully through the participation of everyone. However, with this method you can do little when facing enormous monopolies. We have to find ways of imposing that on, e.g., Facebook and Google. In the meantime, at least some hope comes from the EU, but it is going to be a long-term project.

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[23] http://freshmeat.sourceforge.net/projects/crabgrass

[24] "Is Facebook replaceable? Tech investor launches bid to 'start the process.' Jason Calacanis, an early investor in Uber, spearheads a contest to find a service 'that is actually good for society.'" (https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2018/apr/24/

facebook-replacement-openbook-challenge-social-media). The website of the competition is https://www.openbookchallenge.com/.