

The Strange Persistence of Tactical Media

“Tactical Media are what happens when the cheap ‘do it yourself’ media, made possible by the revolution in consumer electronics and expanded forms of distribution (from public access cable to the internet) are exploited by groups and individuals who feel aggrieved by or excluded from the wider culture.” (Garcia / Lovink, 1997)

The quotation above is the opening paragraph of The ABC of Tactical Media which in some respects can be seen the founding text, the closest there is to a manifesto for Tactical Media.¹ It was written to coincide with the second edition of the Next 5 Minutes, the media arts festival where Tactical Media was first identified and named. Reading it just over two decades later it is strange to see how many of the fundamental problems of technological exploitation and exclusion still resonate with today’s battles for digital sovereignty and have not diverged substantially from the formula described above.

Tactical Media is a movement that typically combines art, experimental media and political activism. Although this combination had been in existence in various locations around the world for many years it was first identified and named as a distinctive cultural ‘object’ in the 1990’s by an unruly alliance of artists, media pirates and theorists working in Amsterdam and collaborating on a series of festivals called *The Next 5 Minutes (N5M)*.

To achieve an understanding of the origins and legacies of this movement requires an appreciation of four key factors; 1) The Next 5 Minutes festival and the unique culture of the initial hosting venue The Paradiso 2) Amsterdam’s unique role as the movement’s brief epicentre 3) the impact of combining the politics of representation and identity with the hacker’s mission to challenge the power of computational infrastructure 4) the re-specification of Michael de Certeau’s ideas in the post-internet world.

The Paradiso – AIDS Activism & The Next 5 Minutes

The Next 5 Minutes would never have been possible without the commitment and distinctive cultural environment of the Paradiso, a legendary pop music venue in the center of Amsterdam that hosted (and financed) the first edition of the festival.

Although famous as a music venue the Paradiso of the 1990s began programming an ambitious series of public debates. In the words of Caroline Nevejan (who initiated the program) the aim was to transform *‘public debate into popular culture’*.

One of the most significant of these initiatives was Galactic Hackers Party (1989) was the first European public event in which hackers and hacker culture were taken seriously as a social and political phenomenon. The event received significant national and international attention. Following the success of the event Nevejan began planning a follow up project intended to be a more concrete application of the political potential of the hacker ethos and the communications revolution of the early internet. The result was the “Seropositive Ball” (1990), a 69-hour ‘networked event’,

that operated as an alternative shadow conference to the World AIDS Conference in San Francisco. It was at this event that many of the local activists, hackers and artists who would go on to develop N5M and formulate the foundations of Tactical Media first met and collaborated.

The Seropositive Ball proved to be important in revealing a deep fault line in the emerging political culture of media arts. The event introduced to Europe the leading activists and artists at the heart of the campaigning group ACT UP (The AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power). This was an extraordinarily dynamic activist movement, adept at using audio visual media in ways that combined anger, shock and humor to significant political effect. Whilst on the Amsterdam side a loose alliance of local hackers and artists focused on creating a - communications infrastructure that among other things enabled many of those too sick to attend to have some level of participation.

In theory these distinct strands of grass-roots experimental media culture, should have given rise to productive synergies but instead there was a painful but instructive clash of cultures. The essence of this clash is best captured by an intervention in one of the culminating debates by the artist Gregg Bordowitz, one of the most influential cultural activists of his generation.

*"I came to this event looking for common interests based on the specificities of our experiences. But the way this conference is organized is based on a utopian notion of the free exchange of information. Instituted through technology. A use of technology that is unquestioned, uncriticised, unproblematised. Driven by a notion that a universal space can be established through phone links, faxes and modems. If there is one thing that is established through the kind of work we do is that there are no such things as any universal categories, principles or experiences.. ". "There have been many times when technology has been used for technology's sake. I have often felt trapped in a technological formalism.. "*²

The organizers (of whom I was one) were deeply challenged by ACT UP's assertion that we were succumbing to the delusion of the new media-sphere as a universal space of free exchange in which complex problems are seen as susceptible to a technological fix. In this Bordowitz's critique is as potent to today's era of surveillance capitalism as it was to the hacker culture of the 1990s. But still the Amsterdam network persisted in the view that the New York activists could not simply overlook the importance of the powerful new technological infrastructures that were coming into being. We had to engage if they were to resist.

In a very basic sense the concept of Tactical Media that was to emerge in Paradiso's next major project the 'Next 5 Minutes' was driven by an attempt to fuse these two cultures by providing a space where the politics of identity and representation could mesh productively with the hacker critique of closed technological infrastructures. That political and cultural space that resulted would be called Tactical Media.

Amsterdam & The Squatter Ethos

For a few short years Amsterdam was the epicentre of Tactical Media for a number of interconnected reasons. To begin with, the Netherlands was the first country in

Europe to have a completely integrated cable TV infrastructure. So from a technical point of view, making experimental TV and pirate media that reached the whole city was relatively easy. Moreover the Netherlands still had generous program of grants for artists and a welfare system that acted as a kind of ‘universal basic income’ for many artists, squatters and media pirates. This combination of financial and technological affordances enabled the libertarian anarchists of the Dutch squatting movement along with hackers and media artists together forged a uniquely vibrant and fractious media culture.

Anyone arriving in Amsterdam at the tail end of the 1980s would have encountered a living embodiment of McLuhan’s ‘global village’. Not only in the literal sense of being a small city with all the intensity and swagger of a capital but also in its distinctive media architecture. This unique media architecture was the result of the fact that the Netherlands was the first country in Europe to have a completely integrated cable network. In effect everyone in the city had cable TV. But the strict media laws of the time meant that the use of this remarkable infrastructure was highly restrictive. Cable TV was limited to transmitting the normal terrestrial TV channels and transmitting channels from across Europe to the city’s multi-lingual audiences. Locally produced content was not allowed. The challenge to this policy came of course, from the media pirates. Their techniques were simple. They situated themselves in locations near to the parabolic dish used to import the foreign programs and simply transmitted their own illegal content occupying the late night hours as though they were empty buildings.

The Squatters

The *ideological* soil in which Dutch Tactical Media flourished was in part a product of the ‘radical pragmatism’ of the Dutch squatting movement. At the tail end of the 1970s and into much of the 1980s Amsterdam’s squatters were arguably the most dynamic and powerful movement in Europe, able to put thousands onto the streets to protect squats threatened with eviction. Critically the movement went beyond the issue of housing. It was a sub-culture in the sense that Dick Hebdidge would recognise as a “disruptive noise that makes us see the world anew”. ³ It was made up of interconnected hubs of what Peter Lambourn Wilson (AKA Hakim Bey) dubbed Temporary Autonomous Zones ⁴. As a movement squatting was not ideologically rigid. Squats were more like ‘communities of practice’ in which anarchist ideals were expected to emerge through open exchange of practical know how. Although radical forms of freedom was the oft stated goal, squatters tended to conform to quite strict normative pressures, frequently orientated to the acquisition of specialist squatting skills from DIY to legal expertise. ⁵ This pragmatic ethos lent the movement a resilience of a practice-based politics and direct action. Like hackers it is important to note that squatters were not just a political movement they were also defined by with a strong aesthetic (neo-punk) with their own bars, cafes, galleries, magazines and pirate media channels. Many of those who became leading cultural enablers had previously been involved in the squatting movement editing magazines and Pirate media.

In the latter years 1980s the power and cultural influence of the squatters began to wane and so-called ‘video art’ became fashionable with mainstream museums and festivals mounting ever more elaborate exhibitions made up of spectacular video

installations. Artists competed for access to ever more sophisticated post-production imaging tools producing intoxicating visual effects whilst taking video culture ever further from its original attribute of ‘immediacy’. The most influential force in 1980s video culture was not Fine Art but MTV, which set the agenda for the largely hedonistic image culture of the decade.

But below the radar isolated groups continued to pursue an alternative aesthetic culture of quick and dirty DIY TV. From public access channels in the US that gave rise to groups such as Paper Tiger through to Leipzig’s Kanal X, an extraordinary example of citizen’s TV operating in the “quasi-lawless of the GDR before re-unification.”⁶ these are just a few examples of large numbers of local hubs of media expertise that continued to cultivate a vision of participatory media that was ‘anti-spectacle’.

In Amsterdam an independent media scene was still in development shaped in part by the arrival in 1984 of SALTO, an initiative of the Amsterdam City Council that made cable TV and radio resources available for a variety of not-for profit cultural initiatives. SALTO may have snuffed out the muse of ‘piracy’ but experimentalism continued to flourish including a variety of experimental TV projects such as Rabotnik, Radio Vrij Keyser, Park TV, Kanaal Zero and Hoeksteen live to name but a few.

Tactical Television – Recuperating the Video Moment

Todays overwhelming dominance of the Internet can have the effect of diverting attention from the particularity, impact and importance of video as a medium. In fact the first edition of N5M was promoted as a festival of Tactical *Television* and based on desire to recuperate the medium’s core aesthetic of ‘immediacy’.

Today all moving image content, whether a film, animation, gif loop, glitch or video are all drawn from the web and *flattened* onto our (usually mobile) screens to become a unified generic construct that we just call ‘*movies*’. It is all too easy to forget that each of these media has unique and distinct attributes. In the context of the Internet vortex that video’s radical differentiation from film is in danger of being forgotten.

Once it stepped out of the broadcast studios in the 1960s, Video’s impact was immediate and revolutionary. It was the first audio-visual medium that collapsed the boundaries between *data-capture*, *data-management* and *data-delivery*. Without film’s cumbersome and expensive processing time, content was immediately visible at the moment of capture and available for continuous and repeated examination and playback.

This *forensic immediacy* had enormous consequences not only for art but also for researchers particularly in the behavioural sciences. From the ability to observe the movements of urban crowds to the tracking the tiniest eye-movements of infants, behaviour could be captured and analysed in real-time. The introduction of video is as important to the behavioural sciences as the introduction of the microscope was to the life sciences. Moreover the performing arts could also deploy this powerful investigative dimension adding a new level of reflexivity to their practice and contribute to a blurring the boundary between art and research with implications we are still digesting.

Video’s unique capabilities were also visible in the realm of political activism. In this regard 1991 was the watershed moment when George Holliday, an onlooker on a

balcony in LA, grabbed his the 8-milimeter video Handycam and recorded the violent beating of Rodney King, by officers of Los Angeles Police Department. This act and its momentous consequences signalled the beginning of what we would later call “citizen journalism”. These tactics of counter surveillance continue to evolve to this day as evidenced by the capture and live transmission, on social media, of police shootings that has made a key contribution to campaigns such as Black Lives Matter. So to this day video remains a vital mobilising tool and instrument for holding the powerful to account.

Michael de Certeau

Central to the theorising of Tactical Media was a re-interpretation of Jesuit scholar and anthropologist Michael de Certeau’s use of the term ‘tactical’ in his influential book “The Practice of Everyday Life” (1980) .

In this book de Certeau explored the multiplicity of ways in which urban media artefacts and environments are tactically appropriated and repurposed by audiences and consumers. He argued that consumers were never passive recipients but active, creative and often rebellious partners in the creation of meaning. He was one of the first to understand how “the figure of the consumer takes centre stage alongside (or even instead of) the worker, or better where these two figures are merged. Hardt and Negri thus speak of ‘affective labor’.”⁷

As he was writing in the 1970s the participation of consumers in the creation meanings were invisible. He described their contribution as “*a hidden one, because it is scattered over areas defined and occupied by systems of “production” (television, urban development, commerce, etc)* [...] *it is dispersed but it insinuates itself everywhere, almost invisibly, because it does not manifest itself through its own products but rather through its ways of using the products imposed by a dominant economic order.*”⁸

The utopian theorists of the internet—who came later, saw in these developments the expression of a progressive democratization of culture, de Certeau’s vision was darker. From the outset he saw the relationship between *strategic* power and *tactical* resistance as a profoundly asymmetric struggle, a process whereby the weak are continually probing for opportunities to turn the tables on the strong.

The important contribution of the early theorists of Tactical Media was to recognise that the effect of the digital cultures revolution would be to propel the invisible world of tactics into the light of day. And with increasing visibility would come a reflexive turn in which society would (as we are discovering) find a variety of new ways to show itself to itself.

Tactical Media’s Survival

For more than a decade critics have been routinely pronouncing the death of Tactical Media. In 2008 the media scholar Felix Stalder asserted that “as increasingly people were doing tactical media without thinking about tactical media.[...] it could no longer serve as a distinctive approach to what would define a particular community”⁹

Critics on the left have grown increasingly sceptical of narratives of self-organisation and leaderless movements concluding that emphasis on DIY grass roots media activism was fundamentally futile. Political theorist Jodie Dean typified these critiques portraying the media activists as succumbing to ‘communicative capitalism’s perfect lure in which subjects feel themselves to be active, even as their every action reinforces the status quo.’ [10](#)

More recently theorists Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams characterized tactical initiatives disparagingly as ‘folk politics’ targeting the tactics of withdrawal, resistance, localism: they argued that “As our political, economic, social and technological world changes, tactics and strategies that were precious and capable of transforming collective power into transformational gains have now been drained of effectiveness.” [11](#)

Given such a formidable array of critical voices it is both strange and extraordinary that 2016 witnessed the eruption of one of the most successful campaigns of DIY media activism ever mounted. The rise of the trolls and meme-warriors of the Alt-right used the full armory of Tactical Media to successfully propel far right ideology into the mainstream of US politics. This uncomfortable reality brought home the fact that there is nothing intrinsically progressive about the disruptive aesthetics of Tactical Media.

The Alt-right was born in one of the internet’s most vibrant back alleys, the culture of so-called ‘image boards’, principally 4chan. . The 4Chan message board is a visually stripped down internet forum that was founded by Chris Poole (aka Moot) in 2003. And is generally thought to be one of the last unregulated spaces on the internet. Its anarchic ‘quick and dirty’ ethos would be instantly recognised at any point in the last thirty years as having all the key characteristics of that thing which is supposed to have disappeared; the ‘autonomous zone’.

Two factors are the key to 4chan’s success as ‘meme factory’. The *anonymity* of its contributors as there is no requirement to formally register all contributors are by default anonymous. The designation ‘*anonymous*’ is not only about privacy it is also ideology. It combines a fundamentalist commitment to free-speech with a deep hostility to individual ‘glory hunting’. Anonymous became the designated identity of the activist group ‘Anonymous’ that was most dynamic and powerful activist networks in the first decade of the Millennium.

The second, and equally important reason for 4chan’s success is the deliberate absence of any *data retention* on the site. The discussion threads are often short-lived. In the words of the founder “the site has no memory”. [12](#) The twin factors of anonymity and tactical amnesia effectively short-circuits the foundation of today’s cybernetic regime, in which *data capture* and *analysis* is worryingly combined with automated forms of *social intervention*.

It is little wonder that spaces of resistance have emerged. But it turns out that resistance to the new cybernetic regime is just as likely to take the form of free-speech fundamentalists of the far right as the social justice movements traditionally associated with the left. The workings of 4chan and the ‘image boards’ demonstrate the unquenchable thirst for digital sovereignty. But it should be clear by now that these zones are not in themselves either good or bad. But, like anything powerful,

they are dangerous. We cannot make the mistake of the critics on the left who believed we had transcended Tactical Media.

The final and most important lesson to take from the success of the new Tactical Media of the right is that protest movements and occupations are not enough. The Alt.right (under the influence of Steve Bannon and his management of the Trump campaign) is that media tactics must be combined with a hunger for electoral success and political power. The left must be equally forthright in its willingness to go beyond tactical protest and embrace the realities of power.

1. The archived webpages of the second, third and fourth edition of the Next 5 Minutes Festival can be found at <http://www.tacticalmediafiles.net/n5m4/about.jsp.html>
 2. Gregg Bordowitz, (transcript) Comments during the panel Art and Aids, Seropositive Ball Reader, Paradiso, Amsterdam, June 2, 1990, p. 108.
 3. Hebridge. D Subculture: The Meaning of Style- Routledge (1979) 31
 4. Lambourn Wilson.P : T.A.Z.- Temporary Autonomous Zones. Autonomedia (1991)
 5. Kadir. Nazima Interview - Thinking Allowed BBC Radio 4 - on "The Autonomous Life: Paradoxes of Hierarchy and Authority in the Squatters Movement in Amsterdam" Interview transcription: <http://new-tactical-research.co.uk/blog/anatomising-the-dutch-squatting-movement/>
 6. Stalder. F: The Digital Condition. 47 Polity (2018)
 7. Shavero. S – A McLuhanite Marxism? The Pinocchio Theory Blog (April 2005)
 8. de Certeau. M The Practice of Every Day Life - Introduction xii. University of California Press (1984)
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 10. Dean , J 'Credibility and Certainty', Conference Paper in conjunction with Exhibition 'Faith in Exposure'. Nederlands Media Art Institute, (2007)
 11. Williams. A & Srnicek. N, *Inventing the Future: Postcapitalism and a World Without Work* London: Verso. (2015)
 12. Poole. C: Moot 4chan why it works as a meme factory. *Digiom Blog*. Retrieved April 7, 2010.
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