

Organised Networks Institutionalise to give Mobile Information a Strategic Potential

Ned Rossiter

Centre for Media Research, University of Ulster

N.Rossiter@ulster.ac.uk

Abstract

This paper is interested in how networks using ICTs as their primary mode of organisation can be considered as new institutional forms. The paper suggests that organised networks are emergent socio-technical forms that arise from the limits of both tactical media and more traditional institutional structures and architectonic forms. Organised networks are peculiar for the ways in which they address problems situated within the media form itself. The organised network is thus one whose socio-technical relations are immanent to, rather than supplements of, communications media. The paper argues that the problematics of scale and sustainability are the two key challenges faced by various forms of networks. The organised network is distinct for the ways in which it has managed to address such problematics in order to imbue informational relations with a strategic potential.

Introduction

The question motivating this paper is this: what is the relationship between institutions, networks and the mobility of information? In recent months I've been looking at what various research centres in the UK are up to in the areas of media studies, communications, sociology and cultural studies. I've been doing this because I've just moved from Monash University in Melbourne to the University of Ulster, Northern Ireland and I needed to get a sense of what's going on. The lasting impression I have after idling through a dozen or so websites is that everyone proudly claims to be pursuing activities that consist of building networks. Yet very few of these sites ever explain how their activities constitute a network formation, and I can't recall any that bother to define what a network might be. They must have done this at some stage, however, because many of these research centres and programs delight in informing the reader of how much money they've been able to attract in research funding. I get the strong impression that many of these programs are responding to the latest directive set forth by the command-economy of government funding agencies. One can only presume that somewhere along the line these projects made some attempt at defining their activities in terms of networks.

I would suggest that there is little about the activities of these various centres and programs that correspond with a logic of networks. And here, I am talking specifically about networks that are immanent to the Internet – the primary socio-technical architecture that enables the mobility of data within a logic of informationalism. Really, what the networked university offers all its believers is something akin to what Bourdieu calls ‘circuits of legitimation’ that enable the reproduction of ‘state nobility’ (1996: 382-389). I wouldn’t begin to deny that I’m also caught up in this process.

It almost goes without saying that the networked university is conditioned by the advent of new ICTs which enable connections between a range of institutional entities and individuals that are no longer bound by the contingencies of place. Equally, the effects of neoliberalism in terms of shrinking budgets for higher education and a gradual deregulation of education as a commercial service have played a strong conditioning force in decomposing the traditional university form. These days it is the norm rather than the exception to find that the “transfer” of knowledge and movement information is restricted by authentication firewalls and IP policies underpinned by a hybrid paranoid-blue-sky discourse. Within such architectures, the networked university is hardly conducive to radical information critique or creative intellectual work (although there are of course cracks that do allow such practices). Moreover, there aren’t too many projects being produced out of all this networking beyond the final report that’s submitted to funding authorities who understand no other language than that of counting beans. As the state continues its process of de-institutionalisation, to what extent is a new institutional form emerging that does provide conditions for critical Internet research and culture? How is this form manifesting within on- and off-line practices associated with the Internet?

The Network Problematic

A spectre is haunting this age of informationality – the spectre of state sovereignty. As a modern technique of governance based on territorial control, a “monopoly of violence” and the capacity to regulate the flow of goods and people, the sovereign power of the nation-state is not yet ready to secede from the system of internationalism. The compact of alliances between nation-states over matters of trade, security, foreign aid, investment, and so forth, substantiates the ongoing relevance of the state form in shaping the mobile life of people and things. As the Internet gained purchase throughout the 1990s on the everyday experiences of those living within advanced economies in particular, the popular imagination became characterised by the notion of a “borderless” world of “frictionless capitalism”. Such a view is the doxa of many: political philosophers, economists, international relations scholars, politicians, CEOs, activists, cyber-libertarians, advertising agencies, political spin-doctors and ecologists all have their variation on the theme of a postnational, global world-system inter-linked by informational flows.

Just as the nation-state appears obsolete for many, so too the term “network” has become perhaps the most pervasive metaphor to describe a range of phenomena, desires and practices in contemporary information societies. The refrain one hears on networks in recent years goes something like this: fluidity, ephemerality, transitory, innovative, flows, non-linear, decentralised, value adding, creative, flexible, open, risk-taking, reflexive, informal, individualised, intense, transformative, and so on and so forth. Many of these words are used interchangeably as metaphors, concepts and descriptions. Increasingly, there is a desperation evident in research on new ICTs that manifests in the form of empirical research. Paradoxically, much of this research consists of methods and epistemological frameworks that render the mobility of information in terms of stasis (see Rossiter, 2003a, 2003b).

Governments have found that the network refrain appeals to their neoliberal sensibilities, which search for new rhetorics to substitute the elimination of state infrastructures with the logic of individualised self-formation within Third Way style networks of “social capital” (Latham, 2001: 62-100; Giddens, 1998).¹ Research committees at university and national levels see networks as offering the latest promise of an economic utopia in which research practice synchronically models the dynamic movement of finance capital, yet so often the outcomes of research ventures are based upon the reproduction of pre-existing research clusters and the maintenance of their hegemony for institutions and individuals with ambitions of legitimacy within the prevailing doxas (Cooper, 2002; Marginson and Considine, 2000). Telcos and cable TV “providers” revel in their capacity to flaunt a communications system that is not so much a network but a heterogenous mass of audiences-consumers-users connected by the content and services of private media oligopolies (Flew, 2002: 17-21; van Dijk, 1999: 62-70; Schiller, 1999: 37-88). Activists pursue techniques of simultaneous disaggregation and consolidation via online organisation in their efforts to mobilise opposition and actions in the form of mutable affinities against the corporatisation of everyday life (Lovink, 2003: 194-223; Lovink and Schneider, 2004; Meikle, 2002). The US military-entertainment complex enlists strategies of organised distribution of troops and weaponry on battlefields defined by unpredictability and chaos, while maintaining the spectacle of control across the vectors of news media (Der Derian, 2001; De Landa, 1991; Wark, 1994: 1-46). The standing reserve of human misery sweeps up the remains of daily horror.

Theorists and artists of new media are not immune to these prevailing discourses, and reproduce similar network homologies in their valorisation of open, decentralised, distributed, egalitarian and emergent socio-technical forms. In so doing, the discursive and socio-technical form of networks is attributed an ontological status. The so-called openness, fluidity and contingency of networks is rendered in essentialist terms that function to elide the complexities and contradictions that comprise the uneven spatio-temporal dimensions and material practices of networks. Similarly, the force of the “constitutive outside” is frequently dismissed by media and cultural theorists in favour of delirious discourses of openness and

¹ See Agre (2003) for a brief genealogy of the term social capital. See Tronti (1973) for an Autonomist deployment of the term.

horizontality. “Immanence” has been a key metaphor to describe the logic of informationalisation (see Rossiter, 2004). Such a word can also be used to describe networks. To put it in a nutshell, the technics of networks can be described as thus: if you can sketch a diagram of relations in which connections are ‘external to their terms’ (Deleuze), then you get a picture of a network model. Whatever the peculiarities the network refrain may take, there’s a predominant tendency to overlook the ways in which networks are produced by regimes of power, economies of desire and the restless rhythms of global capital.

How, I wonder, might the antagonisms peculiar to the varied and more often than not incommensurate political situations of informationality be formulated in terms of a political theory of networks? A processual model of media theory inquires into the movement between the conditions of possibility and that which has emerged within the grid of signs, codes and meanings – or what Deleuze understands as the immanent relationship between the plane of consistency and the plane of organisation. How might the politics of networks as they operate within informationalised institutional settings be understood in terms of a processual democracy?

Conditions of possibility are different in kind from that which comes to be conditioned. There is no resemblance or homology between the two. External forces are not grids whose stabilising capacity assures the temporary intelligibility of a problematic as it coalesces within a specific situation. Yet despite these dissonances, networks are defined by – perhaps more than anything – their organisation of relations between actors, information, practices, interests and socio-technical systems. The relations between these terms may manifest at an entirely local level, or they may traverse a range of scales, from the local to the national to the regional to the global. Whatever the scale may be, these fields of association are the scene of politics and, once they are located within institutional settings, are the basis of democracy in all its variations. This isn’t to say that in and of themselves these components of networks somehow automatically result in democracy. But it is to suggest that the relationship between institutions and the sociopolitical habitus of the state continues to be a primary influence in conditioning the possibility of democratic polities.

The persistence of state sovereignty within the immanent logic of informationality presents an invitation to transdisciplinary theorists to invent new techniques of deduction, appraisal, and critique. Indeed, the task of invention is an inevitable one for creative critical theorists inasmuch as they, along with other actors, subsist reflexively within the logic of informationalism. The relationship is a reflexive one because the theorist encounters problems that are presented by the tensions within the triad of networks, institutions, democracy. Problems emerge in the form of feedback or noise peculiar to the socio-technical system. Critical theorists are not, of course, alone in this engagement; it is one they share with many whose labour-power is subject to the constitutive force of networks-institutions-democracy.

My primary interest in bringing the terms networks-institutions-democracy together is to develop a conceptual assemblage with which to think the

emergence of organised networks as new institutions of possibility. From a theoretical and practical point of view how might organised networks be defined as new institutional forms of informationalism? Given that institutions throughout history function to organise social relations, what distinguishes the organised network as an institution from its modern counterparts? Obviously there are differences along lines of horizontal vs. vertical, distributed vs. contained, decentralised vs. centralised, bureaucratic reason vs. database processing, etc. But what else is there?

Networks and Translation

All communication is a process of translation. Networks are uneven, heterogeneous passages and combinations of communication in and through which translation is intrinsic to the connectivity of information as it encounters technical, social, political, economic and cultural fields of articulation, negotiation and transference. Translation, then, is about making connections between seemingly incommensurate things and objects. Translation conditions the possibility of communication, transversality, transduction, intensity and individuation between different systems (Mackenzie, 2002; Murphie, 2004). From the connection emerges a new logic, a new sensibility, and new capacities. At a very basic level, the logic of networks is the process of connectivity.

Networks have the capacity of transduction, which Adrian Mackenzie, via Gilbert Simondon, describes as a process of ontogenesis 'in which a metastability emerges' within biological and socio-technical systems (2002: 16-19). Or as Andrew Murphie puts it, 'transduction *translates intensities* so that they can be brought into individuating systems' (2004). The form of organised networks provides a mutable architecture in which matter is temporarily arrested within a continuum of differentiation and individuation. Transductive forces subsist within the relation between form and matter. The organised network can be considered as a new institutional actor whose political, economic and expressive capacities are shaped and governed by the metastability of the network system. The intelligibility of such arrangements, relations and informational flows is thus most accurately summarised by a theory of translation which incorporates processes of transduction. Translation is truly a concept of praxis. It is part and parcel of every network. Transduction conditions the possibility of organised networks as emergent institutional entities.

Modernity ushered in experiences of mobility, for people and things, in ways hitherto unexperienced. With mobility came all sorts of connections. Railways moved people and merchandise from the country to the city, troops and armaments to the front (Schivelbusch, 1977). Telegraphy transmitted code from the metropole to the antipodes and back again (Wark, 1997). The penny novel accompanied workers on their journey to the office, the evening newspaper or racing guide on their trip back to the suburbs. People, ideas and things came to occupy a shared space and time of motion. In so doing, the experience of movement is at once made possible and defined by new combinations of elements. This is translation at work.

With the onset of the Enlightenment, industrial capitalism and modernity, new disciplines emerged in the hard and human sciences. The discipline of anthropology set itself the task of cataloguing human habits and attributes within a language system that translated in various ways into policy initiatives, geographic survey reports, academic monographs, economic prospectives, architectural forms, museological displays, and cultural exchanges. This too is translation at work. Elements previously without relation, are combined in such a manner that something new is invented (see Brown, 2002: 6).

What I have discussed elsewhere as a processual media theory (Rossiter, 2003a) is derived from research in cybernetics, biology and systems theory that is interested in information as it relates to the problem of calculation, control and determination in order to enhance efficiency. The primary question for first-order cybernetics was how to impose stability and order over the entropic tendencies of information, as witnessed, for example within biological systems and their transmission of DNA code or radio signals and their interference by “noise”. The preoccupation with efficiency in first-order cybernetics denies the relational character of communication. Second-order cybernetics saw the necessity of not banishing noise from the system, but establishing a balance between order and disorder: noise or feedback was “rehabilitated” as a “virtue” of communication within a system (Mattelart and Matterlart, 1992: 45).

Within anthropology, for example, the observer impacts upon that which is observed and changes what might otherwise have transpired in the course of the event, had the observer not been a part of the system. Second-order cybernetics and systems theory thus adopts a reflexive understanding of the relationship between observer and observed. Feedback – what Bateson termed the ‘difference that makes a difference’ – is acknowledged as fundamental to the functioning of the system. Moreover, communication is more properly understood as not a unilinear channel of *transmission*, but rather a non-linear system of *relations*. Corresponding with this conceptual development is a shift from an instrumental view of communication to an understanding of communication as a social system.

When information is located within a capitalist economic system and its practices of production, circulation and exchange, one can speak of the logic of informationalism. The conceptual developments within cybernetics and systems theory correspond with shifts in the logic of informationalism. The logic of informationalism is characterised by various sociologists and political economists as heralding a shift from an industrial age of manufacturing, manual labour, Fordism, surveillance and internationalisation to an informational age of services, knowledge workers, post-Fordism, control and globalisation. Christopher May writes that a central assumption to this change is a belief that ‘New ICTs will transform the relations of production of the economies in which they appear, promoting fluid networks rather than ossified hierarchies’ (2002: 51).

My argument is that in order for networks to organise mobile information, a degree of hierarchisation, if not centralisation, is required. The point is that such organisation occurs within the media of communication. Herein lies

the difference between the organised network and the networked organisation – a point Lovink reiterates in the newspaper for the Free Cooperation conference that’s about to start (<http://freecooperation.org>). Let’s not forget that for all the anti-state rhetoric of anarchists, they, like many “radical” outfits, are renowned for being organised in highly hierarchical ways – typically around the cult of the alpha-male.

Organised Networks as New Institutional Forms

The challenge for a politically active networked culture is to make strategic use of new communications media in order to create new institutions of possibility. Such socio-technical formations will take on the characteristics of organised networks – distributive, non-linear, situated, project-based – in order to create self-sustaining media-ecologies that are simply not on the map of established political and cultural institutions. As Gary Genosko writes, ‘the real task is to find the institutional means to incarnate new modes of subjectification while simultaneously avoiding the slide into bureaucratic sclerosis’ (2003: 33). Such a view also augurs well for the life of networks as they subsist within the political logic of informationality that is constituted by the force of the outside (Rossiter, 2004).

The organised network that co-ordinates relations through the socio-technical form of the networked institution imbues information with a strategic potential. In this respect, the organised network can be distinguished from what David Garcia and Geert Lovink (1997), Josephine Berry (2000), Joanne Richardson (2002), McKenzie Wark (2002), Konrad Becker (2002), Lovink and Schneider (2002), and others on nettime have called “tactical media”. Characterised by temporary political interventions, tactical media activism builds on the legacy of counter-cultures, protest movements, the Situationists, independent media activities and hacker culture.² Lovink and Schneider (2002) provide the following short history of tactical media:

The term “tactical media” arose in the aftermath of the fall of the Berlin Wall as a renaissance of media activism, blending old school political work and artists’ engagement with new technologies. The early nineties saw a growing awareness of gender issues, exponential growth of media industries and the increasing availability of cheap do-it-yourself equipment creating a new sense of self-awareness amongst activists, programmers, theorists, curators and artists. Media were no longer seen as merely tools for the Struggle, but experienced as virtual environments whose parameters were permanently “under construction”. This was the golden age of tactical media, open to issues of aesthetics and experimentation with alternative forms of story telling. However, these liberating techno practices did not immediately translate into visible social movements. Rather, they symbolized the celebration of media freedom, in itself a great political goal. The media used – from video, CD-ROM, cassettes, zines and flyers to music styles such as rap and techno – varied widely, as did the content. A commonly shared feeling was that politically motivated activities, be they art or research or advocacy work, were no longer part of a politically correct ghetto and could intervene

² For a personal history of tactical media, see Geert Lovink’s ‘An Insider’s Guide to Tactical Media’ in *Dark Fiber* (2002: 254-274).

in “pop culture” without necessarily having to compromise with the “system”. With everything up for negotiation, new coalitions could be formed. The current movements worldwide cannot be understood outside of the diverse and often very personal [battles] for digital freedom of expression.

®™ark’s web co-ordinated campaigns against global corporate capitalism, the live webcasting and “Help B92” campaign of Belgrade independent radio station B92 following its banning by Serbian authorities during the Kosovo War of 1999, Adbusters’ culture jamming campaigns against media oligopolies, the electronic civil disturbance activities and “virtual sit-ins” undertaken by the likes of Critical Art Ensemble, the Electronic Disturbance Theater and the Mexican Zapatistas, and the Indymedia campaigns against the Woomera detention centre in South Australia are just a few of the many examples of tactical media.³ Tactical media differ from alternative media, which is typically concerned about consolidating a “better” option for existing media forms (Lovink, 2002: 258; Meikle, 2002: 119). Alternative media are frequently underpinned by moral and politico-aesthetic discourses of “quality culture”. The paradox of alternative media, when it assumes to embody such discourses, is that its “alternative” agenda is rendered in terms of stasis and conservatism rather than change and transformation. Whereas tactical media, as Graham Meikle notes, ‘is about mobility and flexibility, about diverse responses to changing contexts ... It’s about hit-and-run guerilla media campaigns ... It’s about working with, and working out, new and changing coalitions’ (119). Tactical media, then, are about rapidly organised, at times even spontaneous, short-term interventions. Certainly, such interventions may resonate over time – some even become mythical, as has been the case with the Zapatistas. Diverse skills accumulate and are shared across networks; in so doing, they hold the potential for deployment as techniques that address specific situations. Nevertheless, tactical media have for the most part been unable to address the problematic of sustainability.

A primary challenge for tactical media concerns the question of scale. With their focus on creating “temporary autonomous zones” (Bey, 1991), tactical media run the risk of fading out before their memes reach a global scale. And when they do reach a level of globality – as in the case of the B92 streaming media reports, and the refrain of “anti-globalisation” protests centred around WTO meetings – the question of scale becomes focussed around the challenge of sustainability. How are tactical media to create effects that have a purchase beyond the safe-haven of the activist ghetto? As Lovink writes: ‘Grown out of despair rather than conviction, tactical media are forced to operate with the parameters of global capitalism, despite their radical agendas. Tactical media emerge out of the margins, yet never fully make it into the mainstream’ (2002: 257). This is a problematic clearly recognised by Lovink and Schneider (2002):

We face a scalability crisis. Most movements and initiatives find themselves in a trap. The strategy of becoming “minor” (Guattari) is no longer a positive choice but the default option. Designing a successful cultural virus and getting millions of hits on your weblog will not bring you beyond the level of a

³ For developed accounts of these various tactical media campaigns, see Lovink (2002) and Meikle (2002). See also Angela Mitropoulos’ documentation at <http://woomera2002.com> and <http://antimedia.net/xborder>.

short-lived “spectacle”. Culture jammers are no longer outlaws but should be seen as experts in guerrilla communication. Today’s movements are in danger of getting stuck in self-satisfying protest mode. With access to the political process effectively blocked, further mediation seems the only available option.

Various treatises and commentaries on tactical media note the distinction Michel de Certeau (1984: 29-44) makes between tactics and strategies. Graham Meikle makes the important point that strategies, with their exploitation of place, are about permanency over time, whereas a tactic ‘exploits *time* – the moments of opportunity and possibility made possible as cracks appear in the evolution of strategic place’ (2002: 121). In one of the many essays associated with the fourth Next 5 Minutes festival of tactical media (2002-2003), Joanne Richardson suggests that tactical media departs company with Certeau over the production of meaning: ‘Maybe the most interesting thing about the theory of tactical media is the extent to which it abandons rather than pays homage to de Certeau, making tactics not a silent production by reading signs without changing them, but outlining the way in which active production can become tactical in contrast to strategic, mainstream media’ (2002).

I would argue that it’s time to make a return to and reinvestment in strategic concepts, practices and techniques of organisation. Let’s stop the obsession with tactics as the *modus operandi* of radical critique, most particularly in the gross parodies of Certeau one finds in US-style cultural studies. Don’t get me wrong – I’m not suggesting that the time of tactical media is over. Clearly, tactical media play a fundamental role in contributing to the formation of radical media cultures and new social relations. What I’m interested in addressing is the “scalability crisis” that Lovink and Schneider refer to. If one starts with the principle that concepts and practices are immanent to prevailing media forms, and not somehow separate from them, it follows that with the mainstream purchase of new media forms such as the Internet come new ways in which relations of production, distribution and consumption are organised. An equivalence can be found in the shift from centralised Fordist modes of production to de-centralised post-Fordist modes of flexible accumulation. Strategies within the spatio-temporal peculiarities of the Internet are different from strategies as they operate within broadcast communications media. The latter ultimately conceives the “audience-as-consumer” as the end point in the food-chain of media production, whereas the former enable the “user” to have the capacity to sample, modify, repurpose and redirect the social life of the semiotic object. Moreover, there are going to be new ways in which institutions develop in relation to Internet based media culture. How such institutions of organised networks actually develop in order to obtain a degree of sustainability and longevity that has typically escaped the endeavours of tactical media is something that is only beginning to become visible.

The Delhi-based media centre Sarai is one exemplary model of an emergent institution designed along the lines of an organised network. Fibreculture – a network of critical Internet research and culture in Australasia – is another. In their own ways, the conditions of possibility for the emergence of these organised networks can be understood in terms of the constitutive

outside. Both networks address specific problems of sociality, politics, and intellectual transdisciplinarity filtered – at least in the case of fibreculture – through a void created by established institutions within the cultural industries and higher education sector.

Take the case of fibreculture. In many ways the fibreculture network is quite centralised: list facilitators, journal editors, book series editors, website management, conference organisers, etc. Hierarchies prevail. The facilitator's group has endeavoured to make the structure of the network as transparent and public as possible. Even so, the list is not privy to most of what is discussed in these various "backrooms". And to a large extent, that has to be accepted – trust has to be assumed – if the network is to develop in the way that it has. So, a degree of centralisation and hierarchisation seems essential for a network to be characterised as organised. Can the network thus be characterised as an "institution", or might it need to acquire additional qualities? Is institutional status even desirable for a network that aspires to intervene in debates on critical Internet research and culture? How does an organised network help us redefine our understanding of what an institution might become?

One of the key challenges that networks such as fibreculture present is the possibility of new institutional formations that want to make a political, social and cultural difference within the socio-technical logic of networks. It's not clear what shape these institutions will take, but we get a sense of what they might be in cases like fiberculture and Sarai. To fall back into the crumbling security of traditional, established institutions is not an option. The network logic is increasingly the normative mode of organising socio-technical relations in advanced economies, and this impacts upon both the urban and rural poor within those countries as well as those in economically developing countries. So, the traditional institution is hardly a place of escape for those wishing to hide from the logic of networks.

It's important to distinguish the organised network as a new institutional form from traditional institutions that have become networked through their use of new ICTs. As Lovink and Schneider (2004) have recently noted, the maintenance of hierarchical forms of power within hegemonic networked institutions 'is part of a larger process of "normalization" in which networks are integrated in existing management styles and institutional rituals'. Traditional institutional forms – corporations, cultural industries, and the higher education sector – are increasingly appropriating many of the technics of tactical media: you can have your p2p experience (but at a price!) and who isn't advocating the merits of open source? Think IBM and opensource.mit.edu. There's a distinct whiff of new age refashioning in many of these projects as they seek to recapture a "spirit" of sharing and experiences of collaboration – the kinds of things that were swept into the dustbin in the hard-nosed culture of unit-driven corporatism. Ultimately, the networked organisation is distinguished by its standing reserve of capital and its exploitation of labour-power. Such institutions are motivated by the need to organise social relations in the hope of maximising "creativity" and regenerating the design of commodity forms that have long reached market saturation. It'll be interesting to see the extent to which the Creative Commons license is adopted by big

business – I’m guessing it’ll create a suitable amount of havoc, enabling service variation and consolidate an even brighter future for the legal industry.

By contrast, the kind of emergent organised networks that I’m referring to are notable for the ways in which information flows and socio-technical relations are organised around site specific projects that place an emphasis on process as the condition for outcomes. The needs, interests and problems of the organised network coincide with its emergence as a socio-technical form, whereas the traditional modern institution has become networked in an attempt to recast itself whilst retaining its basic infrastructure and work practices, clunky as they so often are. Strangely enough the culture of neoliberalism conditions the emergence of the organised network. The logic of outsourcing has demonstrated that the state still requires institutions to service society. Scale and cost were the two key objections econocrats and servants to neoliberalism responded to. Forget about ideology. These bureaucrats are highly neurotic, obsessive-compulsive types. They hate any trace of disorder and inefficiency, and the welfare state embodied such irritations. The organised network can take advantage of such instituted pathologies by becoming an educational “service provider”, for instance. The key is to work out what values you have that distinguish your network from the MIT model. The other factor is to work out a plan for sustainability – a clear lesson from the dotcom era.

As Phil Agre (2002) has noted, ‘Institutions persist in part because of the bodies of skill that have built up within them’. This idea of institutions as accumulations of skills strikes me as a perfect way of describing what goes on within organised networks such as fibreculture and sarai. Yet why do so many networks fail to persist? What does it take for a network to become sustainable as an organised form? What’s the 5 year business plan going to look like? And how might it do this without sliding in to ‘bureaucratic sclerosis’, as Genosko puts it. Lovink and Schneider (2004) suggest that a large reason for the transience of networks has to do with the factors of information overload, inadequate software and interface solutions, and socio-cultural impasses in online communication.

To this I would add the need for networks to address situated problems if they are to develop into an organised form. I’m not speaking of flamewars on mailing lists or people who don’t express themselves in the correct lingua franca of a particular list – these are features of pretty much every mailing list with a substantial number of subscribers who have a bit of life in them. Rather, I’m talking about problems associated with undertaking projects that require an organised response in order to realise activities such as conferences, publishing in different formats and platforms, educational workshops and training, accredited provision of educational packages to the traditional education sector, new media art exhibitions, software development, online translation of foreign language books, etc. Networks like nettime used to do some of these kind of things in the past, but it seems that eventually their size put an end to that. This doesn’t mean individual subscribers to nettime don’t get together and organise things (they frequently do this!), but it does mean that the “brand” of nettime is no

longer a continuum of relations beyond list culture. Scale, in the case of nettime, has been the impasse to organisation.

Conclusion

In order for tactical media and list cultures to organise as networks that have multiple institutional capacities, there has to be – first and foremost – a will, passion and commitment to invention. There has to be a desire for socio-technical change and transformation. And there needs to be a curiosity and instinct for survival to shift finance capital to places, people, networks and activities that hitherto have been invisible. The combination of these forces mobilises information in ways that hold an ethico-aesthetic capacity to create new institutional forms that persist over time and address the spectrum of socio-political antagonisms of information societies in a situated fashion.

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