



## ISSUE EDITORIAL

### Academic research into activism and new media - the anatomy of a *mésalliance*

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The first edition of Eastbound collects together articles from an international conference on new media and activism organized last October in Budapest. We brought together more than a hundred academics, activists and artists to engage them in a discourse about how contemporary activism is affected by the emergence of new media technologies.

By confining participants to a single space, our aim with the conference was to cross-fertilize the often distinct dialogues these separate groups have amongst themselves. The results, frankly, served mostly to dispell our notion of researchers as looking to activists as gateways to understanding radical social change and thus transforming society itself, and of activists as able to utilize the distilled findings of academic research. The two groups hardly had anything to say to one another.


Problems were identified accurately. Descriptions of situations were thorough. Proposed or realized actions were interesting, thought-provoking and sometimes effective. But these separate instances of activist uses of new media - whether the description was from the inside or from an academic viewpoint - rarely add up to anything particularly consistent or coherent. They remained as they were presented: one after the other. Detached fragments, and little hope of them forming a bigger picture. Neither academics nor activists offered a way to put the pieces together. They left as they arrived: lonely, as strangers.

As for the activists, they had to realize that they face a power that is in constant fragmentation, reshuffle and reboot, continuously morphing as it tries to incorporate the rapidly changing fields of society, politics, economics and technology. Power is not nested in geography or tradition; no longer can it be nested in anything. The global playground forces it to develop the ability of constant recombination, and fierce competition only speeds up this process. And this is the main problem for activists. *How to define the enemy, the adversary, if it is not the same enemy as it was yesterday?* How to delineate the 'single issue' in a complex web of networks, when the legal accessibility of local cultural products is decided in WIPO meetings, when one cannot understand the lack of

trade unions in South-East Asia without dealing with US-based mega-corporations? What is the target for resistance in such cases? How do we define the opposing factions, and how many of them are there? And most importantly, how does one find answers to these question when dissent is left out in the cold, without its traditional ideological aids of the division between left and right, the lessons learned in '68, or Marxism? The big, overarching camps in which everyone can find a safe and sound ideological hinterland seem to have vanished.

Activists need to find new sources of unity. They need to find out what there really is in common between the various single issue groups, which can so easily appear to be similar, even if one is preoccupied with political change in Indonesia and the other with dockworkers in Liverpool. Do they have anything more in common that the fact that they are on the same mailing lists? *And if so, what that might be?* They need to forge new alliances among themselves, as well as an alliance between the people behind their personal mobile-phone and computer screens. They need to address the problems of resignation and passivity, to be able to address the interested parties, to create something that steps out of its particular time and space, out of the tribalism that devalues resistance into a subculture integrated into the very system it tries to resist. *Would that be the new commonality?* Or the how-to of allowing these movements of resistance to mature into political programmes? Transforming guerillas, culture jammers, civilized terrorists - turning tactical people into strategists who are a match for the strategies they resist?

The academic discourse on activism reflects the perplexity of activists. The warning of the Bristol-based stencil artist Banksy, that "*there are no innocent bystanders*", is quickly translated into the scientific notion that observation affects the state of the object being observed. And this is equally true the other way around: the object of observation also changes the observer, if only by the fact that it contests the idea of academic neutrality. *Can we imagine an innocent academic discourse on activism?* What is the use of the position of the innocent bystander, what differentiates the faithful academic researcher of activism from her subject of research? The level of activity? The willingness to act the part of a public intellectual taking sides? The acknowledgement that grand narratives are at an end, and that a more pragmatic approach is required? The recognition that the current academic discourse on the system takes place within that system, and thus that it is constantly recreating existing power relations? *How can academic discourse help outsiders understand resistance and dissent? What help does it offer activists to reflect on themselves?* By the end of the second day of the conference we had to admit that the academics had little more to tell us than the activists themselves. Maybe they are more systematic, and try to keep a distance from their topic. But the lack of a meta-narrative of activism and resistance in the new media sphere is quite apparent. *And we are not sure there is a better meta-narrative than the one acknowledging the lack of it.*



Maybe this is the reason that in this, the first issue of *Eastbound*, the activist and academic texts differ so little. The activist accounts tell us rather more about the conflicts themselves, while the academic texts are more concerned with the interfaces through which these conflicts take place. But they are too similar for it not to be clear that the academic research on current activist practices can add little as long as it denies itself the luxury of engagement.

In the section '**new urban spaces of political action**', Merlyna Lim tells us how uncontrolled cyberspace spawned anti-government demonstrations and accounts for the key role cybercafés have had in this process, as an interface between the two realms. Kiril Avramov describes the role of graffiti in the formation of political identity in post-communist Bulgaria. Laura Forlano's collection of locative technologies of dissent can equally be read as a manual for urban technologies of resistance.

In the section '**Too smart computers: the genealogy of e-utopia and e-dystopia**', the three authors try to map the near future in three fields: Ferenc Hammer explores the logic of a media panic about the corrosive role of computers in education. Giovanni Navarra envisions several fates for e-governments, from total surveillance, through radical integration, to a network of shared weaknesses. Richard Barbrook presents 50 years old unfulfilled prophecies about artificial intelligence, and calls for imagining the future with no recourse to technology-driven mysticism.

In the section dealing with the **political economy of culture production**, David M. Berry contests the nature of property rights, both physical and immaterial, and attempts to destabilize essentialist conceptions of property rights in the digital age. Bettina Fabos draws attention to the dangers of the Googlax - the oligopoly of search engines as information mediators. While describing the struggles of Downhill Battle, Sam Howard-Spink also recounts the pros of free culture movements. Finally, Robert Horvitz, after summing up various historic frameworks of media regulation, directly addresses the reader with the question: which regulatory approach do we want to set the tone?

The section '**Cyber guerillas, cyber partisans**' includes Chris Bailey tells the story of the Liverpool dockworkers' strike in 1995-98, and the role of the Internet in its success. Klaus Schönberger deals with fake information and hoaxes, and interprets these fakes as an expression of a changing understanding of politics as found in parts of new social movements critical of globalisation. Dan Mercea tells the story of the Romanian Mindbomb project, and in doing so offers a blueprint for future culture jamming projects.