

REVIEW

The Truth About Networks

Between the total hell of networked, salaried labor and the promises of the commons

by Trebor Scholz

In short succession the first two in a series of publications called "DATA browser" were just released. Both start out with historical texts to search for effective contemporary models of cultural production that merge socio-technological with artistic critique. "DATA browser 01" takes Theodor Adorno's and Max Horkheimer's notion of the culture industry (1944) as a departing point. "DATA browser 02" links to Walter Benjamin's essay "The Author as Producer" (1934). Let's start with Brian Holmes' essay "The Flexible Personality," which contributes a rare meditation on today's network society and sketches out an intellectual history of anti-systemic movements that becomes the critical backdrop for both volumes of "DATA browser." Here, the Paris-based art critic, activist, and translator Holmes leads us into a social landscape of total network hell. Together with the social theorist Maurizio Lazzarato, Holmes is not on board when it comes to the techno-utopian celebration of the networked life style. Lazzarato thinks that new networked techniques are even more totalitarian than the assembly line. Brian Holmes includes a reference to Adorno's notion of the authoritarian personality (1950), which is defined by its rigid conventionalism, submission to authority, opposition to everything subjective, stereotypy, an emphasis on power and toughness, destructiveness and cynicism, and an exaggerated concern with sexual scandal. Holmes' criticism of networked labor is sharp - he argues that distributed, casualized labor is based on the ruthless pleasure of exploitation and soft coercion that the laptop as portable instrument of control affords. The Italian philosopher Paolo Virno places questions about idleness, leisure and the refusal to work at the center of the discussion about contemporary production.

Brian Holmes points to the "de-localized" production of the "networker" or "connectivist" that helps today's firms to eradicate social programs. In "flexible capitalism" networked, salaried labor can be easily monitored and leads to ever more surplus that can be extracted from the laborer to the rhythm of the mouse click. Holmes uses the term "prosumer" for a consumer who becomes an amateur producer within the networked enterprise. According to Holmes the networker as satisfied individualist and hyperactive single is always ready to jump and take advantage of every opportunity and is left unmoved by all the data mining and acceleration of consumption. In his essay "The Producer as Power User" Pit Schultz, who describes himself as "social media architect" also talks about the marketing term of the prosumer and

introduces the "power user" (neither amateur nor professional). Dependent on the participation in the global communication apparatus everyone is a power user. According to Schultz, the workplace becomes a state of mind for the power user aiming for total productivity. The power user comes in different degrees of machine addiction and is an advanced user with administration and customization skills. Her unpaid labor mainly pays off through the social reputation economy created from social capital gained from contributions to the gift economy of the public domain. The power user follows the "I post therefore I am" so that more links go to and from her name and URL. And when she publishes in books and journals, she references her ephemeral online materials. The power user produces ever more redundant work that inevitably leads to radical mediocrity and "panic publishing." Power users love free content and are passionate about the growing open archives.

Other "DATA browser" essays add a variety of examples that shed light on the hopeful potentials of network culture and open environments. The texts in these two volumes respond to the civic disengagement and decline of social connectedness and look for ways to re-connect us with the anti-systemic oppositional culture of the sixties. How can new forms of solidarity emerge and help us to create a better society based on the desire for equality? How can collective projects, and communicative activism serve to foster distributed creativity, peer relations, openness and collaboration? Which case studies can be presented that dismount criticism of blind idealism when it comes to the commons? Today's culture-activists from Delhi and Pittsburgh to London operate through technology and networks that have the ability to reconfigure power relations through the creation of knowledge pools, free wireless networks, and sharing of information in open archives. Browsing through the texts in Db 01/02 theoretical threads lead from Paolo Virno's "A Grammar of the Multitude," and Manuel Castells' "Rise of the Network Society," to Michael Hardt, Richard Barbrook, Cornelius Castoriadis, Tiziana Terranova, and Naomi Klein. It is clear from these examples that theory here is not groomed in the academic observatory but conceived of as tool that is linked to practice. In fact, reading these texts I felt like going through a transcript of a round table discussion in the sense that the authors have much common theoretical ground.

In these two volumes theory, art and political action inform each other rather than being conflated with one another. While Holmes and Schultz demonstrate new typologies of the networked laborer, the Delhi-based group of media practioners "Raqs Media Collective" points to an alternative reality. In their essay "X Notes on Practice" the group points to Argentinean workers, who faced with a failed money economy, developed their own exchange system based on self-regulation and free interchange outside of the circuit desired by capital.

Within the cooperation commons people create and distribute content. This

overwhelms traditional companies that cannot match the massive amount of free content created by a multitude of user communities. These cultural reservoirs and much of cooperation-enhancing technologies allow the like-minded to connect and share knowledge. This has the potential to undermine the content hegemonies of universities, museums, companies, and the military.

Knowledge pools put in place unorthodox knowledge economies. They are communal, exchange spaces that allow anyone to re-use/share and edit content. Users move away from systems of production and distribution that are based on market relations. The London-based writer, artist and curator Armin Medosch emphasizes that the most important property of the internet is its capacity to promote the creation of social communities. He reminds us of the slogan "Under the cobblestones, the beach!" which was used during the imaginative student protests in 1968. As example for the formation of groups in the internet Medosch describes the ad hoc mode with which the democratic globalization movement approaches spontaneous organization and mobilization. Medosch makes us also aware of the opportunities afforded by ubiquitous, unwired networks such as the free wireless network groups Consume.net in London, Freifunk.net in Berlin and Funkfeuer.at in Vienna, that all follow a decentralized, self-organizing network model. In a similar search of new modes of cultural production The Institute for Applied Autonomy and The Bureau for Inverse Technology both infiltrate and critique the culture of engineering from the inside.

This series of "DATA browser" books is published by Autonomedia in New York. Its overall goal is to link emerging cultural practices to the socio-historical context out of which they evolved. Data that are sent through the physical networks of the internet are mostly interfaced through a screen and interpreted by a browser. Browsers such as Firefox display these data packages that they receive from hosting servers. In a similar manner, this series of publications frames and interprets cultural practices that bring together social, technological, and artistic critique.

In a third volume that will come out in the fall of 2005, the editors will follow the conference "Curating, Immateriality, Systems" at TATE Modern (London, June/July 2005). This event investigated a range of positions currently occupied by curators in the context of digital media and immaterial production. This upcoming volume "Curating Immateriality" will examine ways in which new media artworks are curated taking into account their ephemeral and collaborative nature. Theory in all volumes of "DATA browser" is not seen as a final word on the topics that it engages - with most essays adding to a collaborative flow of ideas about networking, and current modes of cultural production.

<http://www.data-browser.net>

ECONOMISING CULTURE: ON 'THE (DIGITAL) CULTURE INDUSTRY'

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