

Download Downtime

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Part I:

On my way to Zurich I met a colleague at the airport. We both fly routinely. "I can't do it anymore," he said. "All this air travel is just too much downtime for me." I moved onward, passing through airport lobbies in New York City, London, and finally my Swiss destination. In these in-between spaces I was persistently confronted with big, fat, backlit ads. And they were all about time. T-Mobile's slogan is "Upgrade your downtime". The airline Jetblue draws attention to their wireless hotspots at John F. Kennedy with the commanding "downtime-download". The mantra of the British Vodaphone is "The power of now!" BT shows a jolly businessman fly-jumping through what looks like a landscape of Powerpoint charts: "The digital network economy. Where business is done". At John F. Kennedy airport, Sprint, the American cell phone tycoon, set up yellow placards in the size of a house that say "yes to making just about any place a workplace." It made me stop. I was baffled. How dare they be so in-my-face about what I perceive as the agony of immaterial labour?

Before moving to San Francisco, I had never heard terms like "quality time" or "downtime". In East Germany, for me, time was just time indiscriminately. For a wide variety of reasons, there are many who pledge allegiance to everything not-networked, offline, and non-digital. Who can blame them? Post-Fordist work conditions turn the super-mobile manager into a networked lap dog. At six in the morning, those waiting in the airport gate area pull out their laptops. Sneaking a glance over their shoulders, I see spreadsheets. The networked early morning workday starts with coffee and a cheese-and-egg-pizza. Downtime now is download time. Life is work. There is not enough time to rest, cook, reflect, or walk in the

woods.

The insidious penetration of the Internet into our every grain is hard to deny. Workers become part-of-the-solution nodes rather than full-time employees. Health insurance can be done away with. Wages in the immaterial networked realm don't have to bear resemblance to the work that was done. And who ever mentioned pensions? Also, unions get whacked when the workforce is geographically pieced together. Then there is Lucy Lippard who claims in "Lure of the Local" for a return to a a sense of place. But the widespread, uprooted lifestyle against which Lippard and also Jane Jacobs argued seems like peanuts compared to what is happening now: the horror, the horror.

Passing through these airports, the Net started to feel like an itch that we can't scratch.

Much of the discussion about networking is focused entirely on business. Howard Rheingold's essay "Technologies of Cooperation" is magnificent and inspired, but it is written in large part to help out the amazon-dot-coms of this world. Doug Rushkoff comments in his blog that he hopes for the ideas in his latest book to help businesses (and well, also a few others). Fair enough. What's wrong with that picture, you may ask? Well, let's just say that there is a utilitarian impetus that rarifies play and experiment, at least if they don't link up with business interests sooner rather than later. Let's just say that I hope for people with insight into network technologies and their human uses to also take on projects that do not support those who already have plenty. Why help eBay to make even more money? Some cultural workers have much in common with managerial networked types. Brian Holmes points to that. It's not just the rock stars of what Richard Florida calls the creative class who sit on planes next to the smiley jet-set manager. Artists become entrepreneurs of themselves. Self-worth is quantified in frequent flyer miles and in the numbers of invitations. But the opportunistic, ego-tripping art entrepreneur is not all there is. Cultural practitioners travel all over the world to

perform their ideas. They are gift-givers, with all the problematic hierarchies that this creates. On good days they enact their ideas with passion, inspiration and substance. The Brooklyn-based artist Martha Rosler documented her more-than-frequent passing through airports in many series of photographs and critical writing. She describes her motivation for these works related to her occupation. She travels to far off conferences, and museum lectures. And in new media as much as in photography, the international scenes are closely knit. Travel is a substantial part of the lives of cultural producers. I can't point to the traveling managerial networkers "over there". They are not so very distant or conveniently different from me. I don't have all the ethical and political righteousness on my side. I am part of the picture. The network beast also lives inside of me.

We move through space. "We" are all those cultural producers who fly thousands of miles to talk to different audiences or present their artwork. We are quite the experts when it comes to travel. We know it all. Airport, home, gallery, and lecture hall are equally familiar venues for us. We have it down. We know how to block off obnoxiously loud fellow travelers. We recognize how to remain friendly (most of the time) with borderline-abusive security personnel. We inhale every magazine article about tricks of air travel. Our bodies are transported through the air. We are just resting. Covered with masks, our eyes are closed. We enter a think space. We know what to do about the lack of humidity on planes. The increased elevation at take-off jazzes us up. We know when to stretch and which way to rotate our ankles. We have developed a continuity of purpose that makes it secondary where our bodies are located. The scenarios through which we move don't distract us so much anymore.

We repurpose trains, and airport lobbies into offices. The person next to us becomes unwillingly involved. We pull ourselves out of the public into the private networked space. We shift through the walkways of airports, drive in taxis and trains. Networked devices keep us always anchored, always in touch, consistently connected to myriads of social networks. But the flickering screens to which we are

hooked are not just the Bluetooth lifelines to the boss. We have all those with whom we share our lives in reach nearly at all times. We cannot feel the warmth of their faces. We cannot touch them. But in our “downtime” we can talk or exchange text messages. And doing so may prevent us from talking to the stranger right next to us.

We “grow” network tentacles (like air roots) that allow us to be always on. There is the perpetual, invisible link between our body and the nearest cell phone tower. We are always plugged in, interlinked at all times. In the city, at the moment when the subway train comes out of a tunnel to go over a bridge, dozens of people who endured at least 15 minutes of out-of-reach time pull out their devices to feel reassured that they did not miss something. The technology is not plated into us. It is miniaturised. The only piece of hardware that Lev Manovich mentions in his blog, for example, is the “I-Go”, a universal connecting plug for all kinds of devices. It allows him to leave the cable clutter at home. Our nano-sized multipurpose devices are not what counts. What matters is the linkage that they establish. The wireless Internet signals casually picked up by our laptops facilitate exploitation. We have to look hard to see the emancipatory nature of socio-technical networks. But it’s on the edges of network culture that the sun sparkles. It’s not in the centre of pesky business culture.

But network technologies cannot be reduced to instruments of oppression and casualised labour that squeeze every last drop of genuine energy and creativity out of the worker. Cooperation-enhancing technologies are not by default networked assembly lines. The Treo “smartphone” is not the beast. Laptops are not merely locative Wall Street devices. Cell phones are not the pervasive enemy. Groups of protesters at the Republican convention used them to escape police tactics. But by the same token, networked technologies are also not inherently linked to a deviant life style or oppositional cultural practice. Technologies define us. We are conditioned to relate to them in predefined ways. Using technologies changes what we know and how we know it. But we do have a say in this. We can shape the

technologies that we are using. Networked technologies do not have to stand for servitude. We can dream up uses of technologies that meet true human needs. We can support emerging alternative socio-technical networks by reflecting on technologies without utopia-glazed eyes. Critiquing the venomous impact of networked, neo-liberal managers is vitally important. But don't stop there. Don't leave the discourse about considerate uses of cooperation-enhancing tools and networking to them (or to them inside of us).

PART II:

After anecdotal reflections about time and self-governance this section points to novel resistant visions that express a deep ambivalence about network technologies. Without following one central argument, it looks at the amazing realities and potentials of cooperation-enhancing technologies while not losing track of the dark side of the networked life. The WWW is naturalized in today's United States. One need not subscribe to the gibberish of network salvation: technologies will not save humankind. But a critical attitude cannot ignore this network of networks. There are innumerable ways to resist the networked condition but the Che Guevara rhetoric of radical mutiny is futile. The closed, raised fist is empty. The fingers bent in toward the palm and held there tightly do not signal a blow anymore. In North American cowboy country even Homer Simpson wears a Che Guevara T-shirt. Today, the radical politics of Che, the Argentinean medical doctor who took off into the Bolivian jungle stand in for a neo-liberal catharsis. Counter-cultural gestures are rapidly absorbed by the event-culture of the spectacle. Culture jamming, graffiti, independent publishing, and experimental social work are assimilated. Autonomy, however temporary, becomes increasingly harder to imagine and comprises are unavoidable.

Where are the millions who are desperate enough to put their lives in jeopardy for a revolution? In the US such political upheaval cannot be simply cooked up. The affect of a vast number of people here is muted by consumption, disinformation, and information overkill. False hopes, lies about class mobility, and the "American Dream" are uploaded

daily. The multitudes here work boundless hours, stay poor, and are without health insurance. Distraction flattens feelings of boredom, fear, and anger. The disjointed desperation of workers who are not place-bound remains inconsequential. Their disappointment, anxiety, and aggravation does not boil over. Citizens blame themselves if their emotional life goes haywire. Self-help, psychopharmaca, and psychotherapy are recommended destinations for support that can reshape the individual as a functional member of a non-functional society. If there is a revolution under way then it is a revolution of relationships. Sociable web technologies allow for new interconnections. These technologies shock us into a novel paradigm: commons-based peer production. With Web 2.0 netizens are more likely to be touched by the emotions of those who are pissed off. Affect becomes more visible and connected. It can be mobilized online. In "Intensities of Feeling" Nichel Thrift writes:

"Plato's discussion of the role of artists comes to mind as an early instance: for Plato art was dangerous because it gave an outlet for the expression of uncontrolled emotions and feelings. In particular, drama is a threat to reason because it appeals to emotion." ... "these knowledges are not only being deployed knowingly, they are also being deployed politically (mainly but not only by the rich and powerful) to political ends: what might have been painted as aesthetic is increasingly instrumental." [1]

Foucault's notion of biopower describes bodies as being politically regulated by a series of technologically embedded, disciplinary interventions. The insertion of a blip, a high-pitched brief interruption is critical. Resistance is about time, about embodied *and* technological networks, about self-governance and the politics of affect.

"The ruling class seeks always to control innovation and turn it to its own ends." [2] Network skeptics have strong arguments. Their first shout is "utopia." But despite the military-industrial roots of the Internet examples of ironically "cybercommunist" uses and alternative economies of gifting and sharing and commons-based production are everywhere. They clearly irk the masterminds of the original Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA). Technologies are *reverse-engineered* to be used against the intentions of their inventors. The throw-away video camera becomes a cheap tactical media device.

The stereotype of the white, obese, socially alienated teenager spending hours on end typing away on his computer in the basement needs to be balanced. Embodied social connectedness increases for those who are frequent email users. In addition to social alienation, skeptics also question the efficacy of online resistance in the face of the anywhere and nowhere of the Internet that, following their argument, does not speak to the disparities of class, race or gender in a particular locale. But in his essay "Situated Software" [3] Clay Shirky points to a trend as part of which web-based software projects are tailored for a very specific community and locale.

Skeptics claim that media activists miss out on the smell of sweat of "real people" at a demonstration. But practices of resistance are increasingly hybrids situated between embodied and disembodied experience. In the face of the increasing pervasiveness of mobile devices the distinction between the connected and those cut-off from the WWW becomes increasingly meaningless. Activists still go from door to door and they do demonstrate forcefully as we saw with the worldwide anti-war protests on 15 February 2003. They use blogs and mailinglists and online artworks to further their objectives, organise, and document their interventions. There is hope: new solidarities are created across networks and marketplaces. Wikipedia provides access to knowledge. It is a much contested example of cooperation-enhancing technologies that benefits the public. People prefer being a bit wrong with Wikipedia to being slightly more right with Britannica. Individuals with network access and free time can cooperatively produce in the commons. They out-cooperate entrepreneurial giants.

Increasingly, the online drifter becomes a media author. Recent studies by the Pew Institute have shown that 73% of all Americans identify themselves as Internet users out of which 51 million are involved in online content production. However, the Googles and eBays lure people into their web of content production. Online participants donate themselves. Corporate pockets are filled based on their clicks, their every move, their mere presence. Their attention becomes the asset of the imperial global network economy. The heads at Trendwatching.com are smoking to find ways to put distributed

creativity into the service of the word-of-mouse economy. They want to turn the enthusiastic web-drifting “crowds” into corporate work horses: the proceeds of openness. A cautious attitude in this context means to resist the convenience of proprietary tools like iTunes and "free" hosting services like GoogleVideo or YouTube. Micro-politics start here: with Archive.org and Free, Libre, and Open Source Software tools. Archive.org is a non-profit initiative set up by Brewster Kahle in San Francisco. Contributing content in the form of videos, audio, or texts to this repository supports the larger project of the commons-based sharing economy rather than reinforcing Google's market grip.

Independent, freely negotiated social networks allow participants to protect themselves from burnout and bitterness. Such social networks can be called *extreme sharing networks* (derived from the concept of extreme programming). They allow access to a distributed talent pool and associated resources. In *extreme sharing networks* participants can create visibility for discourses and artworks that would be otherwise overlooked. They inspire younger generations of artists by exposing them to ideas and art projects. *Extreme sharing networks* have the ability to respond to issues in a fast and flexible way. Inside and out of brick and mortar institutions they can shape expectations. Extreme Sharing Networks partly live in institutions and to an extent they exist outside of them. There is no absolute extra-institutional innocence.

Today's tech-fatigued should not be worried by the fact that they cannot bear the labor that it takes to keep up with evolving technologies. Ignore the overwhelming data streams that are speeding through the wires like cockroaches. Online communication can bring out the worst in some people's character. Online, responses cannot be modeled on facial expressions. Emoticons are impotent crutches for a lack of emotional expression. Speedy flame wars cause much stress and regrets. The spontaneity, riskiness, and visibility of online collaboration is not for everyone. However, the art of online dialogical practices can be learned.

iTunes beats slip into this country's living rooms. Ipods choreograph the cadence of the

everyday. News and blogs are syndicated onto screens and become the day-to-day soundtrack. They are setting the thought agenda. Shutting off, at least at times, is fruitful. Leaving the cellphone at home is tempting. The “always-on” condition leads to hours spent filtering. Independent and deep reflection becomes rare in American remix culture. An 8-hour work-day sounds radical today for those dispossessed of their time. Getting rest is a far-reaching proposal in a society that is all work and no play. Time management is again used as political tool. In 1978, the Slovenian artist Mladen Stiljnovic, for example, created a photo series that shows him sleeping in his Ljubljana apartment. Title: The Artist at Work. “Don’t let labour drool over your leisure time!” Stiljnovic seems to say.

Every day in flesh conversations are cut off by the freeze frame initiated by the ring tone. Cell phones become extensions of the body and obsessive attention to email inboxes re-routes experience to the virtual. A cry for attention is covered up as need for communication. Self-worth is defined by Google results for one's name, the total of blog subscribers, or the number of visitors to one's websites. Disappointing the power-oriented, competitive self-assertion, and efficiency-enhancing aspects of social technologies is radical. Historically it has been the job of artists to disabuse social expectations. The “Power of Now” slogan that Vodaphone advocates could be best interpreted by going for a swim. T-Mobile’s “Upgrading Downtime” could be interpreted as an invitation to read a book. “Downtime-Download” could be a call to recollect a meaningful encounter. It is unconventional to have a concentrated, long-term life vision that is unimpressed by the surrounding carrot-and-stick-society that sets its citizens up to arbitrarily drift from one opportunity to the next. Living a more engaged, critical cultural life means to have actual friends for whom one cares. Instead of competition, mutual aid is at play. This is not socializing with business associates, mingling among professional favor networks, or hanging out with people who may advance one's career. It has nothing to do with the intense loneliness that one can feel among one's 9000 “friends” in a secluded, online friends-network. Each online stroll aims to cultivate subjects as products, as "users." Everything about contemporary existence, every part of life is exteriorized, is real-time, is blogged, and documented, is paired with visibility. In this

context it is rebellious to disappear, to unlink, to be nobody going nowhere. Disregard the defining spirit and mood of our time and search for your own fascination.

A deeply felt ambivalence about sociable web media transcends this essay. On the one hand there are the obvious problems of utopian network flurry in the face of clumsy technologies in front of us. There is the exploitation of the geographically networked laborer, the brutal governance of information overkill that does not leave space for critical, independent thought and self-governed action. There is the politics of visibility: everything is tracked in real-time, exposed, documented, blogged and available. Contributors to corporate open content environments volunteer themselves as unpaid workhorses. On the other hand, and very importantly, there are many actualities that sociable web media call into existence. Online connectivity allows for networked affect. Anger, frustration, and joy become visible.

The question remains how to activate affect on a larger scale for political purposes. An additional reality is commons-based peer production with the free encyclopedia Wikipedia and the open source repository "Freshmeat" are convincing examples. This sharing economy is neither an utopia, nor a fad: it is a reality that needs to be reckoned with. This essay calls for a passionate embrace of social web media that is cognizant of its palpable lingering dangers.

References

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[2] Wark, McKenzie (2004) *A Hacker Manifesto*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

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