

EMERGING SCENARIOS IN SOCIAL AND ARTISTIC PRACTICES WITH MOBILE TECHNOLOGY

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INTRODUCTION

There is a new element that must be added to collaborative social practices: mobile technologies, which are fast becoming the catalysts of mixed co-existence spaces where artificial information co-exists with urban space. These emerging technologies come at a key historical moment in which the network culture is entering a new and beneficial cycle for social and artistic practices. The promises of the so-called 2.0 are starting to show their true colours through collaborative practices which in many cases repeat the errors of the past. However, the absence of intermediaries in areas such as journalism (Blogs), information exchange (P2P) and the creation of decentralised nodes for Internet connection (WiFi) offer us new ways of constructing knowledge. In addition to this, the penetration of mobile technologies offers the possibility of generating alternative communication scenarios in geographically disadvantaged places due to the precariousness of technological infrastructures. The portability and processing capabilities of mobile technology are giving rise to practices that facilitate collective action by increasing the possibility of working from outlying areas.

GLOBALLY PARTICIPATIVE AND LOCALLY RESTRICTED SOCIAL MOVEMENTS

In the nineties, there were certain social movements which have become a reference in world history. These social practices were gestating at a time when different communication technologies were emerging which would ultimately position themselves as the catalysts for collective participation. Today, it is difficult to imagine these movements without the use of communication networks such as the Internet. It can be said that those participative experiences gave rise to new social practices which have become the norm today. Thanks to increased access to telematic networks, collective participation on the Internet has become the focus of action. «Furthermore, above and beyond the social morphology level, networks are increasingly related to the values associated with basic participative democracy, self-management, horizontal connections and decentralised coordination based on autonomy and diversity.» (Juris, 2006:417).

We can situate the emergence of these social phenomena in the Zapatista

movement in the Chiapas jungle in Mexico in 1994. To understand this socio-political event, we need to analyse the actual participation of Mexican society in this information flow process via the Internet. At the time, Mexico was - and continues to be - a developing country despite the fact that it was a signatory to the North

American Free Trade Agreement in 1994, which supposedly placed it on the list of developed countries. Stark economic and social contrasts reflect enormous inequalities in the standards of living of a large part of the population. In short, Mexico is a country that has historically struggled between large quantities of poverty and the enormous economic flows generated by the wealth of natural, cultural and industrial resources it possesses. Against this backdrop, an important factor is its proximity to the United States which has provided it with a bridge to the immediate access to the most sophisticated technologies - whether legally or illegally – whose distribution among the population has been irregular.

It can be said that in 1994, the bulk of the Mexican population - which could easily be more than 50% of the total – had no access to the new technologies emerging in global societies, even at the public university level which at the time had restricted access to the Internet, not to mention the fact that outside of the country's three largest cities - Mexico D.F., Guadalajara and Monterrey- there was little knowledge of what Internet even meant.

However, on the northern border, the relationship with technology has always been different due to its proximity to Californian technology centres.

Obviously, the information on this conflict was transmitted to the bulk of the population via the *Old Media*: daily newspapers, magazines, television, all monolinear media controlled for the most part by very specific interests. At the same time, as a form a collective participation, there were protests in the streets of some Mexican cities. Hence, the great media *boom* generated by the Internet took place externally since it was directed at foreign receivers.

In the book, *The Global City*, published in 1999, Saskia Sassen notes in relation to these social movements that they are “movements restricted to young, middle class individuals with Internet connections and the resources to travel”, young people living in primary or secondary “global cities”.

In relation to the Zapatista movement, we can conclude that most of the Mexican population missed out on the flow of information via the Internet. In fact, it was the upper middle class and the foreign participants who finally nourished this movement

with the use of new technologies. In this regard, the Zapatista movement benefited from the possibilities of new forms of communication which made it possible to transmit their ideals through the Internet to the people that were open to receiving them, people who, unlike the Mexicans, had the infrastructures needed to receive them and expand upon the information. Paradoxically, the national population did not participate as actively as other groups in the strategies that brought this movement to the public's attention at the global level. However, with the passage of time, the seed planted by global cooperation through cooperative networks has grown over the years, resulting in an exemplary participative model based on a social cause.

BRIDGING THE TECHNOLOGICAL DIVIDE AND NEW PARTICIPATION POSSIBILITIES

The standardisation of mobile technologies in society is due, to a large extent, to the commercial component involved. The historical evolution of technologies such as landline telephony or the Internet can attest to this. What is paradoxical about it is that many of the outlying areas where landline telephony and, by extension, Internet have never been fully developed now have mobile technology: «[...] the paradox of being saturated by the latest telecommunications technologies like the mobile telephone, while other basic infrastructures such as roads, postal service, rail service, electricity and landlines deteriorate.» (Rheingold, 2004:185).

Portable digital data transmission systems that were previously perceived as luxuries reserved for only a few can be found today in almost any underdeveloped country due to commercial pervasiveness and low costs.

Real time communications are one of the factors that have driven social movements. Previously, disseminating information was complex and costly and the response was not instantaneous. The new communications networks «provide specific mechanisms for the creation of physical and virtual communications and for real time coordination of the different movements and groups.» (Juris, 2006:418).

To a certain extent, the technology gap has been closed in places where Internet or landline telephony had never been fully accessible due to the precariousness and lack of social policies. These mobile technologies have fostered cultural forms based on new formats and self-organising groups with data transmission capabilities and constant updating.

The new cultural models based on network cooperation through wireless devices have the potential to become laboratories of democracy in the information era. The technological leap has generated new social cooperation options in the Third World and this technological paradox could be the source of participation formulae and the creation of knowledge: «the expansion and diversification of networks is much more than a specific organisational objective: it is also a very valuable cultural goal in and of itself.» (Juris, 2006:429).

By way of example, in cities like Rio de Janeiro or Mexico City, countries within countries, chaotic cities of disproportionate geographic dimensions, the use of Internet from a desktop did not represent any logistical or organisational support in the difficult task of moving about these large cities, with all that that involves. On the other hand, portable communications have been a great help in different problematic aspects such as public safety or organisation, with the consequential impact on local economies. This is very significant when one considers that, due to global migratory flows, cities are gradually becoming the most densely populated places on Earth and communications play a key role in their development.

Obviously, the new opportunities in this globalised world are effectively used by corporations seeking market niches in any social change, regardless of how minimal it may be. The behaviours generated by the use of mobile devices have attracted the attention of the audiovisual industry which has lost market share with the rise of Internet and is planning and implementing strategies to invade our small screens by sending all types of contents intended to generate mass consumption. At the recent *3GSM World Congress* held in Barcelona, it became clear that this industry expects to earn millions of euros from the distribution of pornography for mobile devices. Perhaps the positive part of this is that since this is big business, the investment in this form of communication will continue and if we are capable of devising alternative uses there are probably important social benefits to be obtained.

TECHNOLOGICAL SIMPLIFICATION AND FREE ACCESS

When one speaks of communication technologies and mentions the omnipresent Microsoft *Messenger* service, it usually has pejorative connotations and its use seems to reflect computer ignorance.

The success of this program and the free electronic mail programme *Hotmail* resides in the fact that they are free, easy to use and, above all, easy to manage. While it is

not my intention to publicise the company that created these computer programmes, much less its monopolistic policies, it is important to note that these services have permeated society due their ease of use and accessibility and today are a part of popular culture at the global level. Their pervasiveness in society has been gradual to the point where many millions of users today use these services on a daily basis.

The study of these cases is essential when trying to promote their positive aspects and choose paths leading away from corporate control.

Our feeling is that their strength resides in how easy they are to operate and use. The more uncomfortable users feel about technological devices, the more complicated it will be to get them to use them and they will probably end up being more concerned with operating aspects than with the contents themselves. In addition to the success of these services, we have the emergence of the so-called Web 2.0 technologies: Blogs, Wikis, P2P, etc., all of which have a common theme: the simplicity of use and the collaboration possibilities through which knowledge is acquired. «It is also a process of cultural revindication in which individuals once again have access to the information production and distribution circuit.» (Rheingold, 2004:195).

Not long ago, the famed theorist Lev Manovich spoke of a recently coined concept, the *controlling nature* of technological devices which refers to the aesthetic experience of possessing and handling new mobile devices. While this is important to the industry, it would seem that simple and intelligible use for societies in which illiteracy rates are very high, i.e., more than three-quarters of the world population, is something that still has not been resolved.

NEW POSSIBILITIES FOR OLD PROBLEMS

What do we do with the new possibilities of collective participation? What are the advantages and disadvantages for society of new mobile devices with processing and connection capabilities?

Obviously, developing countries with serious problems such as unemployment, housing or poverty cannot change their socio-political situations overnight simply by using these cooperation technologies. Social change has always been accompanied by social policy and economic reform, but it is also true that if we combine past experience and knowledge, we can envision future scenarios of action that point

toward social change. Obviously, the power structures control the informative and cognitive flows that pass through their hands, but what happens when these flows are small and they circulate through new distribution channels? In this regard, it is necessary to take an in-depth look at the new cultural and interaction spaces being generated, since it is there that we will find ways of creating collective knowledge disassociated with the dominant power structure. «Wireless communications offer a power platform for political autonomy through independent channels of autonomous and person-to-person communication.» (Castells, 2006:289). On the other hand, the research coming out of the artistic territories working with these devices could be the seed which germinates into social exercises for basic democracy coordinated at the local, regional and global level. «The mobile resources which can complement informal information exchanges, generally unwittingly, which occur in the order of interaction or influence the size or location of the public of such exchanges, have the capacity to change the threshold of collective action.» (Rheingold, 2004:201).

THE ARTISTIC METAPHOR AND ITS PROXIMITY TO SOCIAL ACTION

When an idea in the art of new resources strays too far from a potentially real application, it becomes a utopia.

Artistic practices have – to a greater or lesser extent – been the catalysts of utopias linked to the technological future of civilization. The premonitions of science fiction literature and cinema have produced innovative ideas in relation to the new possibilities for the co-existence of men and machines. In reality, many of these Utopian ideas have created hope but have finally crumbled, leaving society waiting for another Utopia in which to believe so as not to fall once again into despair. We are approaching the peak of a new Utopia, that created by the Web 2.0, which has created an aura of optimism. This new label is riding the crest of the wave and in many cases promises to be the “informative democracy” so many have yearned for, although history has shown us that we should be cautious with future readings of these phenomena.

Perhaps the *gap* can be seen in the fact that in the field of research it will always be possible to go farther with words than with events. As a result, we get theoretical lines that are either completely outside of the realm of possibility or applicable only to very reduced sectors of society. The balance could lie in parallel research located at the halfway point between theory and application in practical technological

development, as in the case of artistic laboratories and innovation and design laboratories.

With regard to these social practices, one of the most interesting lines coming out of the art world could be the one that is based on the daily use of technology by common, ordinary citizens without the need to train them in order for them to participate in a piece or installation. When referring to technological resources, Marshall McLuhan affirmed: «As they become easier to use, decentralisation becomes more intensified.» (McLuhan, 1996:131).

Interesting in this regard is the work of Antoni Abad, *zexe.net* which consists of participation projects using emerging technologies – mobile telephones – to generate a network in a sector where there are significant social self-organisation advantages to be found. As he explains on his website, this is a «cellular audiovisual communication project for groups without an active presence in the preponderant communication media».

This group has generated its own, independent knowledge based on the artist's initial guidelines, who disappears when the project begins. Mobile devices are used to document taxi drivers' travels around Mexico City, the experiences of prostitutes in Madrid and the lives of gypsies in Lleida: "groups that have been mistreated by the media who manage their own representation [...] through the construction of platforms and tools wherein the reality speaks for itself.» (Peran, 2007).

These types of projects highlight the different aspects of the problem, from the access to technology to the possibility of generating an alternative to the dominant media. «Only by reconstructing their costly negotiations for accessing the necessary technology in such diverse places can an eloquent account of the economic, social and political protocols that govern the management of new communication technologies be constructed.» (Peran, 2007).

Another example is the British Blast Theory group with its project *Can You See Me Now?* They work with alienated sectors in developed countries, more specifically rural inhabitants, adolescents and others who, due to demographic and/or geographic circumstances, are disadvantaged. Involving these types of social groups is noteworthy since the importance of a particular population has historically been related to its proximity to the centre of power. «When a type of operation "cultivated"

outside of the specialised areas and the restricted media within which they are generally framed is put into practice, we will have begun to solve many of the contemporary world's most critical problems.» (Lévy, 199:108).

The project mixes virtual information and physical space and explores the relationship between technological infrastructures and the cities and interaction scenarios where the inhabitants live. The fact is that the pervasiveness of wireless communication devices in society is an irreversible process and this type of project helps to visualise potential future practices.

One subject that has been addressed recently is the pedagogical work that needs to be done by art and new technologies focusing on the people outside of these realms. In this regard, the understanding of these projects must be facilitated by their design, i.e., on the basis, for example, of the use of pieces that are easily digestible by the public at large. Perhaps we should think of the design as a clarifying discipline so that not only can researchers and artists imagine future applications but the common man on the street can also contribute, transforming technology and adapting it to his needs. After all, he is a part of this society.

FROM THE OUTSKIRTS TO THE “GLOBAL CITY”

Global Cities, as the places where the power and technological infrastructures are located, are characterised by having too many political and economic interests, which is understandable when one considers that in the age of the global market, corporations project their power onto the nation-state. In addition to this, telecommunications policies constitute one of the main themes in the development of many countries. Following this logic, small or less important communities due to their lack of visibility and distance from these major arteries have the chance to experiment in a carefree way and to become the research laboratories for socio-technological research. The paradigm in the world of technological art is found in Linz, a small Austrian city located in Central Europe which lived in the shadow of Salzburg when Mozart was a resident there. In the era of globalisation, places of these characteristics can, through their innovative ideas, become genuine communications laboratories, creating models that are subsequently copied by the large cities due to their proven effectiveness.

In the city of Vic, in Cataluña, the *guifi.net* project came about as a reaction to the need for wireless data connections between the surrounding villages. The project

has been developed independently with the collaboration of people who, without any kind of economic interest and remaining within the boundaries of the law, have worked together to create 3,253 wireless nodes for file transmission and shared Internet connections located in Vic and neighbouring villages.

Joan Gaudes, a student at the Escuela Politécnica de Vic, says that the project was developed for the sole purpose of cooperating. They have asked the town council for assistance to buy the necessary hardware since, according to Gaudes, the town council should help because «we put them there and if they want to continue they need to help the citizens; the money they contribute is our money». The idea behind this project was to connect two villages by cable to play video games simultaneously and today different groups in the city of Barcelona have asked them for help to do the same. Gaudes is convinced that if the system of distribution cells for access nodes were to be installed in some buildings in Barcelona, enough people would certainly join that it would get to the point where the telephone companies would buy into the system, since it would be more profitable for them to render their services with this model. According to Gaudes, people approach the project at first thinking that the only benefit is the Internet connection, but the project encompasses communications in general and involves cooperation, the exchange of ideas and advice on the installation of this system in other villages. All of this takes place in an atmosphere of collaboration in which all of the participants apparently understand there is a common benefit.

A similar case related to this trend would be the open code programmes used by the government in Extremadura. The Junta maintains that there are numerous advantages, including simpler relations with users and the fact they it now saves millions of euros previously spent on the purchase of commercial programmes. These projects lead us to believe that a new model is in the making for collaborative mass production and that, despite the industry's interests, we can see a light on the road to group knowledge, a road which apparently runs from the outside to the centre.

CONCLUSIONS

It has been 13 years since the Zapatista insurgents surprised the world with their innovative way of using a new medium for social purposes and many things have changed, particularly the use of Internet. Nowadays, the possibilities for collaboration are infinite. Perhaps the problem lies in understanding whether there are really

new forms of social action or whether we have merely become consumers of these practices for the benefit of technology producers, without actually making any improvement to society. In short, society has matured and as Manuel Castells mentions in reference to wireless technology: «Not only do we find new scenarios, but there is now a series of strategies at the institutional and consumer level for using wireless communication technologies for the purpose of spreading access.» (Castells, 2006:331).

The new possibilities for collaboration using portable resources could enable us to integrate the part of the population that was left behind in the first Internet wave and that will never have the infrastructures needed to use a computer. Moreover, if the metaphors coming from artistic practices are brought closer to social practices, discovering the alternative possibilities for the use of mobile technology, the results could be enriching.

One of the burning questions to be analysed in these territories includes the smoke screen created by the so-called Web 2.0 and its goal of incorporating the voice of the people. We are referring to the promise of sharing in the media which ultimately turns into an enormous database that is once again centrally controlled, with the possibility of selling the information without consulting or remunerating the creators/participants. The new business model is not clear yet, but it is known for sure that generating and storing audiences is a practice that is on the rise and that becomes an asset when it can be used for economic negotiation in which the promise of social participation is merely a pretext for generating hyperconsumption.

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