Internauts, Punks and Infrastructure

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1   Internet Put into Place

The Internet wouldn't be the same if the protocols and physical infrastructures would fundamentally change, but the thing we talk about when we say "the Internet" in daily speech, such as that the internet will be a basis for the future society or the future economy, or that the internet is a tool for democracy, refers to something more than the infrastructure. It refers both to the infrastructure and how it is enacted. This paper attempts to look at different strategies for this enactment in order to keep the cultural vitality of the internet.

   As the general conception goes, infrastructure is something that you build and supposedly just have without effort. Something that is just there. But as Nigel Thrift[1] have shown, even

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[1] Stephen Graham och Nigel Thrift. "Out of order: understanding repair and maintenance". I: *Theory Culture and Society* 24.1 (2007).

infrastructure needs constant maintenance. Infrastructure is not something you can build and then simply leave to its own devices. For us who are engaged politically in internet issues and with digital culture, this has become painfully evident the last years. From efforts of the copyright industry to shape the internet infrastructure, to discussions about future internets that break with the fundamental principles of the internet as we know it and more recently the experience of the internet blackouts in the middle east and north african uprisings.

On the other hand, if the internet is not to be considered an infrastructure that is put into place it must be considered something that needs to be performed. Latour said that technology is society made durable,[2] but clearly he is neither a hacker nor an industry lobbyist. The construction of the internet is slower, more resistant and more inert than the fleeting performance of a theatre piece. But this is a difference in scale and in terms of the actors involved, not in principle.

Viewing the internet as a performance not only has the consequence that it constantly needs to be maintained, but also, like any performance, that it might change from time to time and even run out of steam. A performance is an intervention in a specific context. It implies having to distinguish between which procedures make the internet the internet and which that are its superficial manifestations, rather than accepting the internet and its path of development as it is today as its final form.

2   The Original Punks

Let me clarify this with an analogy. Let us compare internet as we know it to punk music. For many people, punk is and was the perfect music scene and the perfect style of music. The energy in punk, the participatory nature, the rawness, the immediacy — nothing can beat it. The book Lipstick Traces by Greil Marcus exemplifies this perfectly.[3] Punk as it was in the beginning a moment as good as it gets, but then something happened. Punk was commercialised. Maybe it started already with the Sex Pistols, or maybe they punked the commercial world - opinions differ. But at some point, punk was destroyed. One strategy today can thus be to try to rebirth the early days of punk. To recreate them outside of the commercial sphere. To do punk the way it is supposed to be and to fight the degenerate version of punk we have today. The price you pay for this strategy is endless discussions of exactly when the authentic moment of punk took place. This would be equal to treating punk as infrastructure that should be repaired.

Treating punk as performance would create another strategy. It would recognise that punk was an event, an ephemeral moment, and by the time it was commercialised there was already something else that was more punk than being punk. Punk was not about the clothes or even the way the music sounded, it was about a certain attitude to life that manifested itself at that point in time in the music style of Punk. From this perspective, the commercialisation of punk was not a problem because even if it destroyed punk music, perhaps acid house or hip-hop was the manifestation of "punk" more than punk rock.

Now when the case has been pushed this far it's time to reflect on what this means (before actually finalising the metaphor and return to the internet. . .). The whole argument seems so-

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[2]Bruno Latour. "Technology is Society Made Durable". I: (1991).

[3]Greil Marcus. *Lipstick traces: a secret history of the twentieth century*. Harvard University Press, 1990.

mewhat anti-political. Why fight the commercialisation of punk and other subcultures when you can just move on to a new thing? There are a few arguments against this. One is the democratic argument. Even if the original punks move on to hip-hop and acid house, the majority will be stuck with a watered down version of punk and have no idea of what punk really is about or what radical potential punk once had.

Another argument has to do with the secondary effects of the commercialisation of punk. The commercialisation of it happened at a time when the music industry was moving away from having live music as its firm base and when recorded music starts gaining ground. As a result (or maybe as unintentional effect, see the research of Rasmus Fleischer[4]) the collecting societies start to get more aggressive. In Sweden the collecting societies start collecting money for recorded music being played in public places. A practice that was first meant as a way to discourage people owning cafes and bars from getting a jukebox instead of hiring live musicians but that quickly became a substantial revenue in itself for the music industry. Around the same time the cassette levy gets implemented making cassette tapes more expensive. Now, I'm sure that the chronological correctness of this is not absolute but for the sake of analogy it holds. The point is that even though the post-punks don't care about the commercialisation of punk rock per se, the secondary effect is that they end up with more costs for recording and distributing music on cassettes and on running public places where music is played. So even if the performance takes on a new shape, it relies on being nurtured by an environment that can be damaged as a secondary effect.

3   The Lost Internet

Can this analogy then be applied to the internet? Isn't internet different because it is so generic and it's principles the best possible way of doing an open network? Perhaps, but this is what will be investigated from the perspective of internet as performance.

Let's first look at the internet as we know it today; the protocols it is using, the way most people communicate on it, the way it is designed. Let's imagine we are the original punks. Surely, already today some people say that the internet is not what it used to be. Maybe it ended when commercial ISPs became dominant, maybe with web2.0. Maybe it is still located at a point in the near future when net neutrality will definitely be breached on a large scale. The infrastructure way of tackling this problem would be to defend the internet against its threats. To fight to keep the true internet. This is seen today, for example in efforts to define what a real internet must consist of to be called internet (As expressed in the work of La Quadrature du Net and The Julia Group). The problem is as always to determine at what point we actually had the real thing and when it was subverted. In net neutrality, this is represented by the problem of how much an ISP should be able to alter the network for "technical reasons". Peering? Combat spam and botnets? Prioritising VOIP over web only as long as it does not distinguish between providers of the same kind of service? Difficult questions indeed and truly echoing endless debates on what the authentic punk moment really was.

The opposing strategy of internet as performance exists as well, for example with the cip-

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[4]Rasmus Fleischer. "Kassettband och kassettersättning". Diss. Stockholms universitet, 2005.

herpunks[5] who argument goes along line of: "to hell with vanilla internet, you can have it, try to monitor and censor our cryptographic, distributed darknets if you can!". The same arguments as with hip-hop and acid house are valid here as well. The majority will be stuck with biased, censored, filtered and monitored vanilla internet even though the cipherpunks will be alright. We could also imagine the environmental argument from the cipherspace point of view. Even if you don't care what happens to the vanilla internet, secondary effects of the destruction of it can also hamper the development of cipherspace. This could for example be a development of a two-tiered internet where cipherspace can only exist in the slow lane.

So what does all this amounts to? The point I want to make with these wild metaphors is that instead of just being anti-commercial or anti-filtering, we should really think about what it is and was that made us love the internet from the beginning. What did it do to us? What did it enable? What affects, relations and sensations did it create? What was it about it that made these things possible and how can they be accomplished in other ways while still being internet, or still being punk?

4   The Future Internet

Both the record companies that commercialised punk and the media industry that wants to shape the future internet seem to have a clear idea of what punk and internet respectively is all about and what drivers push it towards the future. In the case of punk, it was the edgy clothes, the chord progressions and guitar distortions and the cocky attitude. In terms of the internet it seems to be more bandwidth, faster transmissions and more high quality content. The media industry is now imagining a future 3D-HD content streaming multimedia internet that according to them is the essence of the internet only faster, bigger and more professional.

Just as with punk, by a shallow comparison it seems to be perfectly fine. Wasn't the essence of punk the shocking clothes, the raw music and the confrontational, no-compromise attitude? And wasn't the internet about quicker and wider access to information, faster downloads, more content? Isn't Spotify like The Pirate Bay, only better, more accessible, more professional? To argue otherwise immediately puts one in the nostalgic camp. It was better before in this imaginary not-so-distant-past before the fall. For many people, both punks and internauts, this is certainly true. But there is also another way of looking at it. That this - often fictional - past, embodied a set of abstract procedures or principles, an abstract machine as Deleuze and Guattari calls it,[6] that can be recreated today but through other, contemporary means; that the past manifestation of this abstraction was a means rather than an end; and that it was a performance that was always destined to run out of steam.

5   Accelerationism

Within the so called file-sharing debate this tendency has been discussed as an accelerationist period — a period that tries to accelerate a set of procedures towards a singularity, or a horizon,

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[5]E Hughes. "A Cypherpunk's manifesto". I: *The electronic privacy papers* (1997).

[6]Gilles Deleuze och Félix Guattari. *A thousand plateaus: capitalism and schizophrenia*. Continuum International Publishing Group, 2004.

in order to exhaust the tendency and to overcome it (For accelerationism in theory, see Benjamin Noys;[7] for accelerationism in practice, see the writings of Nick Land[8]). Within file-sharing this is represented by faster downloads, more bandwidth, filling up more hard drives with content, a desire for accessing more and more information. Let's locate this period roughly from 1999 to 2005.

In punk we can also identify this accelerationist tendency. More shocking, more raw, worse sound, more aggression. But this accelerationist tendency strives toward the horizon and beyond, to a place and an intensity where it can no longer sustain itself, where it destroys itself. Now, the corrupting tendencies, and this can be thought of as a feature of capitalist endeavours, are what makes use of the energy created by the acceleration but binds it within the horizon of the given system. In punk, the major labels used the raw energy and shocking effects and amateurist ideals to be able to quickly launch new punk bands, getting media attention and sell more records, but keeping this moment balancing on the horizon forever, turning punk into a set of eternal poses and standards. The same is happening with digital culture. A service like Spotify or iTunes music store makes use of the energy created by file-sharing but keeps this drive for access in a regulated state, making sure Spotify users also hear the ads, turning the accelerationist tendency into the infinite accumulation of always new music.

6   Post-Digital

But as I stated, the accelerationist tendency strives toward a singularity and beyond where it can no longer maintain itself. The other side of the horizon can both be destructive and give birth to new mutations. The tragic histories of those who pushed punk beyond the horizon is well documented, with the history of Sid and Nancy as the most famous example. Pushing the access of information and acceleration of bandwidth beyond its limits is not fully as physically destructive, but this drive also reaches a singularity where more access does not produce more intense effects of knowledge or cultural experiences as it used to. The result can only be to give it up completely or to mutate. In the post file-sharing climate, one of these mutations has been called the post-digital tendency.[9] In this climate, the media industry that first seemed to be opposed to the internet is now more internet evangelist than anyone else, imagining a future where all culture moves into "the cloud" producing ever more of sameness. Instead, the original pirate punks have begun to talk about culture literally taking place and the importance of understanding and providing context for digital information and culture.

Exactly what form this post-digital culture will manifest is uncertain at the moment, but it won't be just more of the same, not just more leather jackets, distorted guitars, aggressive testosterone-filled vocalists, pixels, bandwidth or accumulated information. What is certain is that it have to consist of different aspects of the original manifestation of the internet than the ones that is current driving its corruption. From this perspective, the corrupting tendency should not be resisted since it simply means that the horizon has clearly been reached. But neither

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[7]Benjamin Noys. *The Persistence of the Negative: A Critique of Contemporary Continental Theory*. Edinburgh University Press, 2010.

[8]Nick Land. *The thirst for annihilation: Georges Bataille and virulent nihilism : an ...* Routledge, 1992.

[9]Rasmus Fleischer. *Det postdigitala manifestet: hur musik äger rum*. Ink, 2009.

should it be ignored and turned loose completely since its secondary effects can be destructive.

Let's speculate on what this post-digital tendency could amount to. For example it could turn into a reversal. Just like the raw human expression of punk turned into the machinic drive of acid house and the macho aggressiveness into the funky post-punk (see the film 24h party people). Apart from the obvious; that post-digital highlights the always forgotten non-digital of digital experiences, we could also imagine that instead of driving bandwidth, processing speed and memory to a maximum, they are sacrificed and turned into a minimum in order to accomplish ubiquitousness, mobility, and resilience. As examples:

- Neil Gershenfield once thought of the concept of internet zero as a ultra minimal, slow protocol for the internet of things.[10] I have myself modified the concept of internet zero to refer to all of the non-digital interface between people and the digital which always exist but not always consist of a mouse and keyboard of a personal computer but by the body itself, the distance to the machine at any given time and sometimes a village sending email by having a motorcycle courier take them on a storage medium to the nearby town in order to send them out.

- Internet communication in emergency situations might not function no matter how many mbits your home connection has but a resilient enough network with many interfaces, mediums and protocols can find a way to get that one piece of essential information to reach its destination.

- Cultural expressions based on low quality trade offs for maximum connectivity, creativity or sociability is already existent, such as the chip tunes music scene.

- Physical computing sacrifices processing power and memory for physical interface and maximum embeddedness, mobility and modularity.

7 Clicks and Cuts

There is also a parallel digital accelerationism and post digitality within the aesthetic domain. Its beginnings can be located to the 90's. The electronic club music from the 80's turned in the beginning of the 90's into jungle, techno, house, in a feedback loop where drug use and intensity of music tried to accelerate each other. A few years later, the production of this music becomes widely accessible due to cheap digital or software-based synthesisers.

A lot of the use newly available digital and software based synthesisers simply mimicked the analog synthesiser, both to appearance and sound. It was even a selling point that a digital synthesiser had the warmth and fuzzy characteristic of an analog sound. Some people, most notably an artist calling himself Oval, didn't like this nostalgia. He wanted to find a digital sound, but was there really such a thing? Isn't the digital simply a matter of reproducing sounds using arbitrary algorithms? Does it have a sound of its own? What Oval found out was that just as the analog medium has its own sound in distortion and modulation of the signal due to inaccuracies, the digital has its sound, but it is a sudden interruption - the glitch - too fast to be

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[10]Neil A Gershenfeld. *When Things Start to Think*. Henry Holt, 2000.

reproduced by humans or analog machines. The glitch is the sudden jump occurring through a digital misreading of the code where the value for the sound wave jump from zero to maximum in an instant. Oval took some CDs, scratched them and sampled the glitchy, clicking sounds.

This soon spawned a number of "clicks-and-cuts" genres like glitchtronica, glitchcore and click-hop, but just as any accelerationism, it ran into a dead end. Soon you couldn't tell the difference between any of the glitchy albums that was constantly released. They all formed a soulless, generic carpet of sameness. Oval stopped releasing albums - until last year.

The amazing album "O" features Oval playing acoustic guitar; although heavily mediated through digital techniques, cut-ups and effects. As one music blogger describes it:

[W]hereas the subject matter of Oval in the 90s was digital audio, the reboot zoomed in on music itself. Oval 2010-style seems very much like Popp's [a.k.a. Oval's] attempt to take music apart in order to see how it works, both materially and in a more abstract, semiotic or even spiritual sense."

Here we see the post-digital tendency of using the digitally inspired methods, techniques and values but not redundantly applying them to the digital itself. The force of an accelerationist tendency becomes stronger after it has been exhausted in its redundant form. Oval is better when he plays guitar, punk is more punk in other styles of music and the internet is more explosive in post-digital environments.

8 Lessons Learned

These are just a few speculations on possible digital futures with alternative drivers to those that are currently driving an internet development that is corrupting its fundamental principles. But it is fair to question if this constant reshaping isn't just a line of flight that is preventing the clash of the political tensions that build up between freedom, desires and cultural control? According to me, they do not imply that fighting for fundamental principles of the internet is in vain, but it approaches that fight from an alternative set of cultural forces. If the copyright industry want to unfetter a certain development from fixed principles such as net neutrality, this perspective wants to retain those principles precisely because they are the public environment necessary to foster the growth of alternative internet futures.

I think we can learn something form Oval here, who managed to step out of the redundancy of using digital technologies for their own sake and began to apply the principles of them to the core of his activity. In the same way, we should search new core activities where the internet infrastructure function as necessary tools rather than existing for their own sake.

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