American Folk Music as Tactical Media

HENRY ADAM SVEC

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Table of Contents

Acknowledgments

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Introduction

'A properly administered electronic system could carry every expressive dialect and language that we know of, so that each one might have a local system at its disposal for its own spokesmen. Thus, modern communication technology could become the prime force in man's struggle for cultural equity and against the pollution of the human environment.'

Alan Lomax[1]

'Songs have proved a wonderful, flexible art form, going from one person to the other. It doesn't have to be written down; it can be memorized. And whereas mural painters need walls, dancers need floors, sculptors need warehouses, novelists need printers, and composers need symphonies – songwriters are lucky.'

Pete Seeger[2]

'I also failed out of communication class for callin' up Every day and sayin' I couldn't come.'

Bob Dylan[3]

Of Signs and Singing

The film *Inside Llewyn Davis* (2013), the Coen Brothers's missive to the mid-century American folk revival, is not exactly of the loving variety. Our titular hero, Llewyn Davis, is capable of competent if not compelling performances of traditional ballads and blues, but he is also hip to the scene's hypocrisies: 'If it was never new and it never gets old, then it's a folk song', he says while finishing up a set at the Gaslight in Greenwich Village, halfheartedly genuflecting towards one of his community's peculiar understandings of authenticity.[4] The night before, at the same venue, the flailing folk singer had launched insults at an earnest auto-harpist from out of town, an outburst for which he will now be punished by the performer's husband in an alley out back just as a young Bob Dylan takes the stage. (We can hear Dylan during the scene, singing his own song 'Farewell', as Llewyn crumbles to the ground.) 'Where's your corncob pipe? Are you wearing gingham panties?' Llewyn had yelled, drunk with sudden fury.

By the film's end, which is tragically also its beginning, it appears that, for now, poor Llewyn has taken to heart his encounter with the junkie jazzman he met en route to Chicago (masterfully played by John Goodman).

This character is perhaps the first to introduce Llewyn to the possibility that his own aesthetic framework is not the only one and, further, that the art made within his Greenwich Village scene can appear hokey to outsiders.[5] 'Where's your ukulele? *We* play all the notes', the jazzman had mocked. Llewyn takes satisfaction in distinguishing himself from his bourgeois friends uptown and from his 'careerist' and 'square' colleagues in the Village (namely his only fans, the Gorfeins, and a hyper-sincere singer-songwriter played by pop star Justin Timberlake). Yet, Llewyn has learned that distinction too is only a game of meaning-making.[6] Llewyn's existential crisis thus involves not only a failure to succeed in 'the entertainment business', but a failure to communicate, in particular and in general. Whereas folk authenticity is taken as an indexical imprint of folk-ness, the real thing unadorned and unmediated, Llewyn's disturbance is perhaps caused by his recognition (or sudden belief) that performative signs are arbitrary signifiers – which can be written and recombined.[7] As I. Sheldon Posen observes, '[t]he traditional folksong revival created an environment in which performers vied with one another in being "folkier than thou"'[8]; but Llewyn's pain derives from his discovery that anyone can use a corncob pipe and wear gingham panties – anyone can be folk (Dylan circa 1962 is a case in point). The film's title ironically sounds out this dilemma, for there is nothing inside Llewyn Davis; it is exteriority (it is *outside* Llewyn Davis) all the way down.[9]

The theoretical disposition at the bottom of *Inside Llewyn Davis*'s implicit critique of the American folk revival is similar to that grounding much critical scholarly work on Western folk music in the humanities and social sciences over the past decades, which has given signification and the production of meaning a privileged place. We have traced connections between political and social movements and various American vernacular and 'folk' articulations.[10] We have seen how tastemakers and gatekeepers have played constitutively mediatory roles in the invention of folk traditions, and social constructions of race, gender, and nation have been at the foreground of these explorations.[11] We have seen how a particular understanding of sound-recording technologies was mobilized by some of these intermediaries.[12] And we have seen how the 'ideology of immediacy' articulated by the folk revival has been incorporated by rock and popular music culture more broadly.[13] Concepts from cultural studies and sociology, such as Raymond Williams's 'selective tradition' and Pierre Bourdieu's 'distinction', have directly and indirectly informed these analyses of the social construction of folk-ness at various times and places.[14]

Much of the work referenced above has been indispensible to my own understanding of the complexities of American 'folk' music, and this

book would not be possible without the groundwork already laid by these scholars. Robert Cantwell's *When We Were Good*, a poetic explication of the folk revival's cultural politics, has proved particularly instructive. Cantwell examines the ways in which American folk revivalism, including the performances and cultural works of participants like the Almanac Singers, Pete Seeger, and Harry Smith, constitutes a rich process of hybrid identity negotiation:

> [L]ike other romanticisms [...] folk revivalism has both an epistemological and a political force undergirding its superstructure of fantasy, dream, and wish. In its very inventedness it embodies a structure of knowledge and an incipient system of affirmative values in which a critical historical perspective, an alternative or oppositional cultural politics, and even a prescriptive social-political program all become possible.[15]

Although the mass-commercial revival of the late 1950s and early 1960s appeared to empty the music of the political content that had been a trademark in the earlier 'folksong movement', Cantwell finds a complex politics in the genre's distinctly Americanist, performative texts and documents.[16] He also pays attention to the location of the tradition within a distinctly modern, technological society, wherein the LP format and the new medium of television were inextricable components of the cultural fabric.[17]

Scholarly treatments of the American folk revival, the moment in mid-20th century America that young people turned to acoustic guitars and to various vernacular traditions, have illuminated the social and historical contexts of this complicated cultural field. But I would like to try something else – to examine aspects of this material using a different set of microphones. What if we actually had something to learn from the revival's understandings of communication, which is not a settled phenomenon of human societies but a malleable and thoroughly political concept?[18] What if the American folk revival had something to teach us about *media*, even about digital media culture? I do not only want to deconstruct the folk revival, though that will happen too.[19] I want to reverse-engineer its medial imaginary, to extract understandings of technological communication that might yet be useful, that might yet be worth singing. Bringing in institutional, discursive, historical, sociological, or dramaturgical perspectives might only be one way of listening to this rich techno-cultural sediment. 'If I had a hammer, I'd hammer in the morning', sang Pete Seeger.[20] In fact, he and his comrades had several hammers, and I want to root a few of them up in the pages that follow. We will dust them off, too, and see what they can do.

'Folk'

At first glance, the conceptual terrain of 'the folk' seems to be as far from 'media', and especially 'the media', as one can get.[21] Indeed, the respective discourses of (mass) media and folk culture in the late nineteenth and early 20th centuries evolved in constitutive opposition.[22] The first collectors of 'people's poetry' in eighteenth-century Europe did not yet have a properly *mass* culture against which to distinguish their findings, but we nonetheless already see the organic and anti-Enlightenment contours of *Volk* sprouting here as if from the land, opposed to Reason, as cultural historian Peter Burke has uncovered; Herder and the Grimm Brothers saw the folk as 'natural, simple, illiterate, instinctive, irrational, rooted in tradition and in the soil of the region, lacking any sense of individuality [...]'.[23] In other words, 'the folk' form a channel without mediation, a body without a head, a solution for the plagues of consciousness and civilization.[24] This anti-modern Romanticism would persist in the work of English folk-song collector Cecil Sharp and in the influential efforts of Francis James Child; it appeared possible to find people outside of modernity – and that those people might be in possession of a culture (even if they themselves could not understand its beauty and power) that might possess a remedy of sorts.[25]

Later pushers of folk culture throughout the Western world transposed these originary Romantic fears of Enlightenment Reason onto the degraded offerings of the nascent cultural industries; alongside the emergent discourses of modernism, such distinctions (between 'authentic' and 'inauthentic', 'nature' and 'media', 'art' and 'entertainment') were often mapped onto social distinctions as well.[26] In opposition to the trivial offerings of the mass-mediated cultural industries, the concept of 'the folk' thus appears as something eternal and solid, which 'heroic' and committed collectors, transmitters, and even writers could gather or present – even, ironically, when using mass media to do so.[27] From another angle, however, things had gotten productively 'problematic' in the United States when technological media entered the folkloristic picture. In 1933, John Lomax and his prodigious son Alan headed across the Deep South with a 300-pound Dictaphone machine soldered into their automobile; like their forebears, they were looking for music outside of *Gesellschaft* – in particular, for African-American singers who had not yet been 'contaminated' by radio or by phonograph records – but they were propelled by the cutting edges of the consumer society.[28] Unlike their forebears, however, at least one of the two Lomaxes was as interested in technology as he was in the 'messages' it might document or transmit. Similarly productive contradictions appeared

in the 'proletarian renaissance' brewing also in the mid to late 1930s in New York City, in which the younger, but not the older Lomax was involved.[29] The Kentuckian activist Aunt Molly Jackson astounded members of the Composers' Collective with her stark and raw purity – she looked like a member of a mining community, which she was – and she was an inspiration for a broader shift in tactical approaches to folk music as an agitprop tool.[30] Rather than prodding the masses with difficult artworks, political artists then made use of the musical raw materials already familiar to *the people*: their folk music.[31] As labour historian Richard Reuss describes this shift, 'Lyrics were apt to be rough, unpolished, sentimental, and uncomplicated by sophisticated political dogma; at the same time, they contained an inherent vigor and occasionally caught the essence of folk poetry.'[32] Yet, although Aunt Molly Jackson's and Woody Guthrie's champions and new friends, including Alan Lomax and Pete Seeger, idolized the dressed-down working folk and their tunes, they also idolized the various machines with and on which the proletarian toiled.[33] Guthrie in particular saw few boundaries between efficient modern machinery and the 'authentic' folk, a way of looking that led his writing into some interesting and unexpected places.

It is for this reason that the perceived revolutionary quality of Bob Dylan's much-mythologized electrification is nothing short of amazing – the American folk revival was plugged in all along. The question for me, however, is not just to what degree did this or that folklorist or folk singer *use* media, which would require a more systematic history than the one offered here. I am interested rather in diagrams and dreams, in models and maps. Across the writings and projects of some of the scene's most prolific and audible translators, what do media look and sound like? What kinds of knowledge and community can they make? To what degree do media encroach upon and trouble the power-laden subject positions of their masterful 'users' and 'writers'? I am not looking for one master theory of 'folk media', but the general focus here is the ways in which the long American folk revival, beginning with the 'proletarian renaissance', but leading through to the mass-commercial success of the genre in the 1960s, has been variously attuned to media of contamination and noise, flesh and time, solidarity and communion. Vis-à-vis Web 3.0 digital networks wherein 'filter bubbles' enclose hyper-individualized pods of self-presentation and consumption,[34] the folk revivalists presented here offer a markedly enthusiastic and refreshingly optimistic articulation of 'making do' with the tools and networks ready at hand, of occupying spaces and producing disturbances in and through communication technologies. We can find in the American folk revival, then, paths untaken in media history but still waiting in the wings.[35]

'Tactical Media'

My aim is to find resonances between the American folk revival and media theory, which is a term that describes a loose collection of interdisciplinary thinkers who give the agency of media a central role in historical change, if not a unilaterally determining one.[36] Media theory is useful because the gatekeepers and tastemakers of the folk genre are thought to have longed for pure presence, for the absence of media.[37] Media theory, on the other hand, allows us to ask questions such as: How do particular media ecologies (or particular assemblages including both 'old' and 'new' communication technologies) ground the production of distinct articulations of, for instance, 'authenticity', 'the folk', or resistance? To what degree were Lomax or Seeger sensitive to the emergence of 'new' media in their work? Media theory from Harold Adams Innis to Friedrich Kittler allows us to formulate articulations of authenticity and 'the folk' that are not necessarily nostalgic but that are situated within dynamic and material media cultures.[38]

Media theory itself is heterogeneous and complicated, and there is also a strand in this tradition that longs for presence and nature. Consider the discourse on 'orality' and the Romantic argument that the alienations inflicted by modern print culture can finally be resolved thanks to the integrated sensory awareness fostered by the 'global village'.[39] The fetishism of the discrete, whole body that we sometimes seen in McLuhan, or in Walter J. Ong's writings, parallels the certainly present thread of nostalgia in the American folk revival; there is an apparent naturalness to the voice and the body 'without media', a deeply Christian ideology Jonathan Sterne has critiqued as 'the audiovisual litany'.[40] The version of media theory mobilized in my book, however, is thoroughly post-humanist insofar as it posits the essential imbrication of human beings with and among communication technologies.[41] As Félix Guattari puts it in reference to the orality and literacy debate, 'Quite frankly, too marked an opposition between the oral and the scriptural seems hardly relevant. The oral, even the most quotidian, is overcoded by the scriptural; the scriptural, however highly sophisticated, is worked by the oral. Instead, we will begin with blocks of sensations [...]'.[42] More on Guattari's 'folk' approach below. For now, the point is that American folk revivalists indeed dreamed of various gardens, but the machine was never very far behind, indeed was generally always already there, lending a hand.[43]

So I will consider certain folk revivalists as media theorists. But the curiosity of my folk revivalists is about more than media as such, or the aesthetic and epistemological opportunities they might create. My folk

revivalists were not only interested in what a mainframe computer, a folk-song broadcast, a Hootenanny, or a typewriter could do epistemologically or aesthetically; they were also interested in the kinds of political communities particular media assemblages might foster, and in the kinds of political structures they might resist or subvert (though these interests were explored with varying degrees of clarity and coherence). Thus, I want to retrieve these thinkers and practitioners more precisely as *tactical* media theorists. Also indebted in certain registers to Marshall McLuhan's later work on media warfare,[44] and thus indirectly also to Harold Adams Innis's consistent attention to power and warfare in his late work, the term 'tactical media' surfaced in the 1990s on the online forum Nettime, at the Next 5 Minutes conferences in Amsterdam, and in the writings of David Garcia and Geert Lovink, who documented some of these early discussions.[45] According to Lovink, 'Tactical media are post-1989 formations. They are a set of dirty little practices, digital micro-politics if you like. Tactical media inherit the legacy of "alternative" media without the counterculture label and ideological certainty of previous decades.'[46] Although various countercultural projects, alternative media, and 'culture jamming' constitute precursors and parallels,[47] tactical media theorists and practitioners have emphasized the interiority of 'tactical' resistance; as the military metaphor suggests, tactical media are intended to strike straight to the heart of hierarchical hegemons.[48]

The 'tactical' in tactical media comes most directly from Michel de Certeau, as Garcia and Lovink make clear in their 'ABC of Tactical Media'. In de Certeau's *The Practices of Everyday Life*, the focus is on user agency over structure; whereas the structuralist impulse from Ferdinand de Saussure to Michel Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* had been on the ways in which sedentary power formations delimit and constrain the range of possible individual articulations, de Certeau emphasizes the numerous and sometime relatively modest ways in which people (users of language and of mass culture) reappropriate elements of those languages and structures to their own ends.[49] Not wanting to reincarnate previous (strategic) counter-hegemonic political movements, such as the vanguard party, Garcia and Lovink find in de Certeau's 'tactics' the perfect nihilistic solution: 'An aesthetic of Poaching, tricking, reading, speaking, strolling, shopping, desiring. Clever tricks, the hunter's cunning, maneuvers, polymorphic situations, joyful discoveries, poetic as well as warlike.'[50] The tactical media practitioner is flexible, mobile, and willing to try new things. 'Tactical Media are never perfect, always in becoming, performative and pragmatic, involved in a continual process of questioning the premises of the channels they work

with.'[51] One can become frustrated by the openness of the tactical media category. What is not tactical media? According to McKenzie Wark, this openness itself, and the focus on practice over theory, is part of the brilliance of the contribution: '[T]he most tactical thing about tactical media is the rhetorical tactic of calling it tactical.'[52] Rather than waiting for the perfect theory of representation, Wark observes, tactical media is about getting down to the business of making culture politically.[53]

Tactical media practitioners and scholars have proven particularly adept at both theorizing and practically tackling the challenges of contemporary activism from within distinctly digital cartographies. The novelty of the networked era and the need for new approaches to subversion and resistance (and the need for tactics over strategies) was perhaps most strongly pronounced in the early writings of the Critical Art Ensemble, wherein the virtual is abstracted, disembodied, hovering above the streets now 'evacuated' by power:

> The rules of cultural and political resistance have dramatically changed. The revolution in technology brought about by the rapid development of the computer and video has created a new geography of power relations in the first world that could only be imagined as little as twenty years ago: people are reduced to data, surveillance occurs on a global scale, minds are melded to screenal reality, and an authoritarian power emerges that thrives on absence. The new geography is a virtual geography, and the core of political and cultural resistance must assert itself in this electronic space.[54]

Much of the scholarly work on tactical media has followed the Critical Art Ensemble, to varying lengths, into so-called 'screenal' realities. Drawing on Autonomist Marxists Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, Nick Dyer-Witheford and Greig de Peuter's book *Games of Empires* highlights the means by which global capital colonizes social and communicative life yet also provides the tools and capacities with which to disrupt this capitalist system. Dyer-Witheford and De Peuter find Hardt and Negri's 'multitude' active and resistant with a host of digital tools, including mods, machinima, 'tactical' games, and piracy.[55] A similar approach is taken in Rita Raley's study *Tactical Media*, which draws on Autonomist Marxist scholar Paulo Virno to consider the ways in which tactical media practitioners both occupy and disrupt the digital networks across which global capital circulates. As Virno and others have argued, the postmodern epoch of 'Empire' marks a shift from the material production of durable goods towards

the 'immaterial' production of images, services, and information; Virno's 'virtuoso' has a privileged place in the productive chains of Empire – it is both the exemplary agent of exploitation and the potentially transformative political subject.[56] Raley considers a wide range of fascinating and important tactical media work with this digital virtuoso figure in mind, from the Department of Ecological Authoring Tactics's work on migration and border power to John Klima's aesthetic treatment of speculative finance, exploring how '[t]actical media operates in the field of the symbolic, the site of power in the postindustrial society.'[57] The work of Alexander Galloway, Eugene Thacker, Graham Meikle, Alexandra Renzi, Megan Boler, and others, has contributed to this vibrant discourse on the diverse international scenes wherein digital communication technologies are used to challenge the logics of digitally networked capital.[58] This indispensible work suggests that the contours of the digital point to the need for fundamentally new conceptions of space, time, and power, which tactical media discourse has in general sought to provide.

But does tactical media need to be digital? Does tactical media discourse need to emphasize the novel and the new? On this point, the tradition has been complicated and heterogeneous.[59] An embrace of the old and the embodied has especially gained ground since the 2011 wave of street protests and occupations across the globe, but this vector has been present all along. For instance, although they do emphasize the necessity of 'the revolution in consumer electronics and expanded forms of distribution' in their influential 'ABC' manifesto, Garcia and Lovink also highlight hybridity and the need for interdisciplinary experimentation: '[I]t is above all mobility that most characterizes the tactical practitioner. The desire and capability to combine or jump from one media [sic] to another creating a continuous supply of mutants and hybrids. To cross boarders [sic], connecting and re-wiring a variety of disciplines [...]'.[60] This pragmatic attitude echoes McLuhan's concept of 'counterblasting', whereby minor (and sometimes old) media (such as the printed book) could be called upon to disrupt media paradigms or to facilitate the possibility of renewed awareness.[61] In a revision of earlier writings in his book *Dark Fibre*, Lovink further emphasizes the possible variety of forms, including 'local TV, pirate radios [...] theatre, zines, street demonstrations, book culture [...]'.[62] In other words, the low-fi and the 'old' medium can be just as sharp (or blunt, presumably, depending on the situation) a tool as the high-fi or 'new'. Even the Critical Art Ensemble have softened on this point over the years, having given more recognition to 'live' forms of dissent and having recognized that we need now to look below the 'screenal reality' of mainstream digital culture.[63] In *Digital Resistance*,

despite the title, they articulate a more layered and subtle conception of communication against power: 'No cultural bunker is ever fully secure. We can trespass in them all, inventing molecular interventions *and* unleashing semiotic shocks'.[64] Elsewhere in the book, they retreat from their earlier position entirely: 'Organic being in the world must be reestablished as the locus of reality, placing the virtual back in its proper place as simulacra'.[65] Indeed, the concept of tactics as understood by this scene (with its emphasis on mobility and surprise attacks) has led to a productive willingness continuously to reconsider anew the situation on the ground, including the meaning and utility of 'the tactical' itself.[66]

We have already found some room in the tactical media toolbox for the American folk revival: Alan Lomax and Pete Seeger, for instance, moved horizontally across the fields of media power and made use of what they could when available, from IBM mainframes to network television. As we will see, they operated pragmatically, picking up and putting down channels (from the voice to multimedia databases) according to the shifting situation on the ground. 'By any media necessary', as the Critical Art Ensemble puts it.[67] It is also worth pointing out that the folk revival has had enough direct and indirect influence on tactical media to warrant its inclusion in a new archaeology of the tactical media event, if we consider the impression that the Civil Rights Movement's use of folk song made on a young Abbie Hoffman, or the Yippies' collaborations with The Fugs (initially signed to Folkways) and the topical songwriter Phil Ochs, or John Lennon and Yoko Ono's folk-song-fueled and McLuhanite 'Bed In' for peace.[68] As Eric Kluitenberg has pointed out, there are also striking similarities between the image in which the Critical Art Ensemble articulated their 'By Any Media Necessary' slogan (a man in a cityscape holding a sign) and Bob Dylan's famous performance in D.A. Pennebaker's documentary film *Don't Look Back*, in which he holds and drops cue cards of his own lyrics to 'Subterranean Homesick Blues'.[69] The point here is that the usual quick genuflections in tactical media histories towards the historical avant-garde, the Situationists, or even the Yippies, are incomplete.

There is also the more important question as to what degree the tying of tactical media to the American folk revival will constitute a productive opening of the former, for there has been much disagreement about whether or not 'tactics' should continue to be a category through which to think about politically engaged media.[70] The Critical Art Ensemble acknowledge that there has been a push towards strategic concerns and towards a renewed progressive Marxism, but they ultimately come down on the side of tactical media as a concept of continued importance, among other reasons because

social actors resistant to neoliberal hegemony continue to lack a territory and because there remains a danger in social movements that seek to ossify and institutionalize.[71] On the other hand, McKenzie Wark has convincingly (yet sympathetically) questioned the suitability of this approach for an age in which logistical and strategic concerns have become ever more urgent:

> Try lots of different tactics. Borrow from art history, from media theory, think of it as a temporary activity which need not make overarching claims or defend its legitimacy. See what works. But the unresolved problem is how to resource such a field of practice. How are resources to be allocated? How are networks to be sustained?[72]

Ned Rossiter and Geert Lovink too have critiqued the 'old' concept of the tactical in their studies of 'organizational networks', which value durability over the formerly beloved quick temporality of tactical media.[73]

More recent engagements have expanded the very concept of tactical media, and this is the position that I too will take up in this book. Michael Dieter, recognizing that tactical media seems to have been all but completely co-opted by the circuits of contemporary production and exploitation, has examined the need for a deeper and more 'environmental' approach.[74] He critiques Raley for not exploring 'anything more-than-human' then proceeds to insist on tactics as 'multiplicity', encouraging us to approach our diagrams of digital and networked technologies in a still-tactical way.[75] By approaching tactical media from a Deleuzian angle, Dieter shifts the question of tactics away from strictly technical networks and onto a more messy terrain of forces and opportunities. A similar move is made in Eric Kluitenberg's book *Legacies of Tactical Media: The Tactics of Occupation from Tompkins Square to Tahrir*. Animated by 2011's 'Movements of the Squares', Kluitenberg recasts tactical media interventions as hybrid intersections of technologies and forces, and he gives the fleshy human body its due role: 'It is the body, and the body alone, that can act as a libidinal force breaking through the containment of the virtualized "circuits of drive" that attempt to capture the restless desire of the contemporary subject for the encounter in public with the unknown other.'[76]

The discourse of tactical media, with its pragmatism, flexibility, and embrace of the low-fi and the amateur, makes it an excellent tradition to rub up against the American folk revival, in order to help us better to appreciate the unique concerns and dispositions of the field. But it is also possible that considering the American folk revival as tactical media could help to expand the potentialities of the latter. I thus see the relationship of

'the folk' to 'tactical media' in this study as one of both guest to host and host to guest: we will see the discourse of tactical media lend concepts and diagrams to our folk revivalists, but we will also see our folk revivalists inhabit these diagrams and concepts, hacking them in turn on occasion, anticipating problems and offering some remedies. This rubbing or mixing together of the American folk revival and tactical media will be productive given the latter's tendency to fetishize, not only the digital, but the new. My long view of tactical media will allow us to jump out of the progressive and evolutionary narrative of media-historical change that tactical media discourse absorbed in the 1990s cyber-cultural heydays.[77] Indeed, the most interesting moments for me are not where American folk and tactical media come together, but where they break apart – where my folk revivalists seek to ground, for instance, the perpetuation of 'electronic disturbances' not ephemerally but over time, or where they operate not only rhetorically or symbolically but through embodied agents, or where their mediatized writings and projects appear to undo their own authority as folkloristic or aesthetic guerilla 'heroes', or where they do not shy away from the affordances of organization. Still, I want to make clear that this thickening and deepening of tactical media by the American folk revival will be carried out less in a spirit of critique than of cooperation. A fellow traveller, I merely wish to add some more tools to the table.

Archaeology

As mentioned above, one of the key theorists for the tactical media scene in the 1990s was Michel de Certeau, who, in *The Practice of Everyday Life*, pays attention to the ways in which agential consumers can circumnavigate disciplinary apparatuses through the creative use of commodities and language; picking up on this theme, Lovink's and Garcia's initial 1997 manifesto also highlights the ways in which users put consumer gadgets to use in new and challenging ways.[78] However, I want to dig beneath this tactical media inheritance of taking tools for granted, including the tools of the symbolic.[79] Following Michel Foucault and the field of media archeology that he has inspired, we consider concepts like media, tactics, and the folk not as stable objects to be used but as discursive constructions.[80]

Going further than Foucault, however, and thus following many who have also made this move, from Friedrich Kittler onward, we are also interested in the material medial grounds of discourse, in the relationships between any given paradigm in which information is defined, stored, or

circulated, and the particular writing, recording, and processing machines that do this cultural-epistemic work.[81] Kittler calls these historical paradigms 'discourse networks', which he defines as 'the network of technologies and institutions that allow a given culture to select, store, and process relevant data'.[82] We can safely say that Kittler's focus on synchronic over diachronic lenses, and his connection of communications technologies to strategic military concerns, leads him away from de Certeau's playful tactics; but it seems to me that, in the same way that Foucault's studies of modern discipline and de Saussure's work on structure were indispensible starting points for de Certeau, 21st-century tacticians need to reckon seriously with media apparatuses of capture and containment. For, if Kittler is even partly right, and our perceptual apparatuses, both 'human' and 'machinic', are spread out across a diverse yet quickly digitizing terrain, then tactical media practitioners need to think more deeply about the contingent assemblages of inscription, storage, and transmission technologies that undergird the symbolic exchanges that are generally their focus. It has seemed as though some accounts of tactical media, Raley's book in particular, have sought to resurrect Jürgen Habermas's 'public sphere' as an ideal model for political media interventions, wherein informed and rational interlocutors speak (or write/programme) truth to power.[83] She does not explicitly engage with Habermas, but Raley is drawn to 'critical' interventions and performances, even defining tactical media as a kind of scholarly practice: '[I]n that their tinkering, playing, and visualizing are themselves a kind of academic criticism, they are not so far removed from my own discourse.'[84] Raley's book is indispensible and has helped me to appreciate better some fascinating new media artworks, but it perhaps backgrounds the layered strata of discourse networks necessarily undergirding contemporary culture and activism.[85]

At the same time, however, though Kittler's concept of 'discourse networks' informs certain swaths of the analysis below, 'discourse networks' are for me much less stable entities than in some strands of 'German' media archeology. It is not that I disagree with the analytical power of the concept; it is only that, being a folk fan, I prefer the discord and friction that can sound out and across systems of writing, recording, and transmitting, and other types of social, technical, and imaginary machines. Thus, following media theorists and cultural historians such as Jussi Parikka, Anna Munster, and Matthew Fuller, I want to inject a strong dose of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari into my media-archaeological expedition.[86] In Parikka's archaeology of computer viruses, he negotiates an uneasy but productive synthesis, considering both 'those abstract machines or diagrams that

connect heterogeneous parts together' and the complex combinations 'where the material is immanently pierced by the incorporeal and the discursive'.[87] Along these lines, there has also been a strong influence made on the pages below by feminist contributions to post-humanist theory, from Donna Haraway's landmark manifesto to Rosi Braidotti's work, which honour the identity-dissolving yet affirmative exchanges between human and a-human.[88] Haraway famously identifies the cyborg as an image that unsettles by plugging in and across, and one might identify the models of communication unearthed here as variations on Haraway's cyborg myth.

The name that I give my approach is 'folk archaeology', which presupposes that 'the folk' does not refer to a natural state of being but rather to 'diagrammatic' or 'abstract' machines as Deleuze and Guattari describe them: 'The diagrammatic or abstract machine does not function to represent, even something real, but rather constructs a real that is yet to come, a new type of reality.'[89] This conception of machines thus blows apart distinctions like natural and cultural, folk and mass; both technologies as well as more apparently ephemeral compositions can be conceived in this post-humanist light. In fact, social machines can precede and even determine the material technical machines.[90] As Guattari writes in *Chaosmosis*, 'Technical machines install themselves at the intersection of the most complex and heterogeneous enunciative components.'[91] Folk archaeology is thus about locating and amplifying diagrammatic machines wherein both folk and media assemblages converge and collaborate, and explicating these circuits. Whereas John Lomax, then, was looking for songs, we folk archaeologists follow the folk (itself a machine or set of machines) across a wide and unstable ecology populated by both analog and digital discourse networks and the bodies and voices (among other things) with and into which they commune.

We also dig down into cracks that have not seen light in awhile. Informed by Siegfried Zielinski's 'deep time' approach to media history, each cut is not necessarily meant to reveal the way things have been or to find anticipations of 21st century media trends. On the contrary, the folk-media sediment we tunnel through is often more complex and striated than that of mainstream contemporary digital culture.[92] Zielinski terms his work '(an)archeology' to emphasize his attention to rupture and diversity.[93] Following Zielinski, we will not be interested in a linear narrative of the American folk revival, though we will work with discourses. Our path will be much more subterranean and dirty, seeking the unfamiliar within the familiar, the complex within the 'primitive', and the leaky within the stable.[94] Zielinski defines media as 'spaces of action for constructed attempts to connect what is

separated',[95] and this indeed opens up the field of media research to all sorts of strange and formerly uninvited guests.

This project is indebted to the spirit in which Zielinski's *Deep Time of the Media* was written, which is 'in a spirit of praise and commendation, not of critique'.[96] But there are some problems in Zielinski's work that I also need to address, for, despite his reverence for Michel Foucault, Zielinski demonstrates a clear affinity for the romantic 'author-function' that Foucauldian discourse analysis has so thoroughly historicized, a problem that has admittedly seemed to carry over into the present research.[97] Remember that, for Foucault, authorship is not natural or self-evident, but is produced by contingent networks of discourse and practice; following his observations we could speak, then, of a folk 'author-function' as theorized initially by the Grimm Brothers or Herder, which emphasizes collaboration and collective creation, or a more modern (and copyrightable) 'author-function' that emphasizes interior, individuated creativity.[98] Zielinski has been critiqued for the ways in which he has seemed to take the latter for granted. For instance, Jussi Parikka has questioned Zielinki's 'deep time' of media history for giving attention almost exclusively to male inventors, each considered by Zielinski to be a 'genius', and Parikka in turn examines how the media art of Zoe Beloff both contributes to and complicates Zielinski's approach by introducing gender into the media-archeological picture.[99]

It can be said that I too give too much attention to 'heroes' in this book, whose whiteness and maleness continue to enable their reaches across the cultural, political, and academic fields of a racist and patriarchal society. However, although I risk further mythologizing the brands of Alan Lomax, Pete Seeger, Bob Dylan, and Woody Guthrie, my own work could more generously be conceived as a tactical manoeuvre or occupation. I look for coagulations and dams of techno-cultural possibility, and have found them pooling around 'authors' of various diagrams of communication, authors whose 'ingenuity' was enabled by the historical power structures of their time. Yet, this act of looking need not take authorship or originality as eternal or transcendent, especially when the 'original, authorial' contributions obsolesce authorship and originality as such, which is often the case with my weird folk revivalists. Future work on the media-theoretical dimensions of the American folk revival will have any number of other directions to take. This initial attempt has sought merely to take the most visible and legitimated producers of text and to trace and track the meanings of media therein. In other words, I found a loose thread and I pulled, and up came some machines, some with relatively promiscuous allegiances.

The Plan from Here

Chapter 2 reconsiders American folklorist and broadcaster Alan Lomax as a tactical media theorist. I examine how Lomax's engagement first with the phonograph and then with digital computers came to inflect his understandings of 'the folk' (or at least how this tendency is inscribed across his writings and projects). I also place Lomax in conversation with cybernetics and information theory, which he encountered directly through his teachers Margaret Mead and Raymond Birdwhistell. Moving against the grain of mainstream articulations of digitality, Lomax carried his phonographic interest in voices into his computational experiments, pointing us towards a tactical, utopian assemblage of digital networking and affective embodiment.

Lomax can help us to explore issues of inscription and archivization. One of Lomax's early assistants in the archives, Pete Seeger, can help us to explore transmission, which is the focus of chapter 3. Seeger was an influential thinker in the revival, bringing with him a deep pedigree (he had travelled with Woody Guthrie and performed in both the Almanac Singers and the Weavers). He was active at the Newport Folk Festival as a board member and performer; he wrote for both *Sing Out!* and *Broadside* (among many other publications); and he released dozens of records in the 1950s, the 1960s, and beyond. Although Seeger took aim at McLuhan in particular in his *Sing Out!* column 'Johnny Appleseed Jr.', by drawing on John Durham Peters I will explore how Seeger's theory of mediatized resistance is a subtle and sophisticated one that often parallels and even anticipates some of McLuhan's claims. Resistance for Seeger is figured as an act of mediatized broadcasting: the tool itself thus productively contaminates that which it relays in a hybrid convergence of folksy, McLuhanite 'counter-blasting'. Yet, this is not a mere anticipation or parallel. Seeger also managed to balance his dissemination theory with a deep concern for time.

Chapter 4 highlights a more recent segment of the thread. First, I analyse the meaning of technology in Bob Dylan's writings and image (focusing primarily on his 1960s output) and in the discourse surrounding Steve Jobs and Apple Inc.; Dylan and Apple/Jobs share roots in Romanticism, both having been worshipped for their individualistic authenticity (Dylan for his own authenticity, Apple for the individualized expression it makes possible for the consumer, thanks to its late hippie/artist co-founder). Drawing on Kittler's concept of 'discourse networks' and Félix Guattari's notion of 'faciality', I consider the obfuscating power of this particular channelization of creativity. In the final section of the chapter, however, I

return to some of Dylan's songs and writings, uncovering a post-humanist Dylan who properly acknowledges his position as a mere relay within a larger circuit of discourse production.

In chapter 5, I step back from the designs of the American folk revival while still carrying forward, I hope, some of its tactical media energy. While I was Media Artist in Residence at the University of New Brunswick, I developed the New Brunswick Laboratory of Imaginary Media Research + Design. Intended as a low-stakes workshop and drawing jam, participants and I built impossible and unfeasible communication machines together. The workshop was motivated by tactical media's insistence on a do-it-yourself work ethic, but also by the longstanding collaborative mythos of 'the folk'. This chapter is perhaps an intermission from the historical research conducted elsewhere in the book, but one in which some of the stakes of the project and the applicability of the findings can be demonstrated.

Chapter 6 seemed an opportune moment to explore in more detail the concepts of authenticity. After explicating some recent theoretical work on this concept, I side with those philosophers, in particular Charles Taylor, who have recommended that we be wary of discarding the fraught concept altogether.[100] Following Taylor and Karl Marx, I consider 'authenticity' in a general and machinic way, as that which we might become together. With this post-humanist conception of the authentic in hand, I then unpack the complex articulation of authenticity found in the writings of Woody Guthrie, finally connecting his imaginary machine 'The Hootenanny' up with the more recent 'People's Microphone' of the Occupy movement.

Finally, in chapter 7, I take the opportunity to reverse the perspective developed throughout the book. Here, we will consider the American folk revival as strategic media. Whereas my folk revivalists have generated a subterranean discourse of media, which it has been my project to locate and to amplify, there is another convergence point connecting 'the folk' to digital culture, which is the highly influential rhetoric around participation, collaboration, community, and networking online. This chapter thus is intended to thicken our 'archeological' approach to 'folk media', giving a fuller and deeper portrait of the landscape.