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Guerrilla

of 1970s

Networks

Radical Media Ecologies

MICHAEL GODDARD

Amsterdam
University
Press

Guerrilla Networks

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Guerrilla Networks

An Archaeology of 1970s Radical Media Ecologies

Michael Goddard

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Introduction

Some activists involved in the Italian *Autonomia* movement in Bologna start a free radio station. They call it Alice, after *Alice in Wonderland*. A few years later, this station plays a key role in the explosion of the *Autonomia* movement and its repression in Bologna. Another group of activists in the US form an urban guerrilla group: they base its name, Weatherman, on a line from the Bob Dylan song, 'Subterranean Homesick Blues' (Dylan, 1965). After an initial disastrous bomb explosion that kills three of its members, the Weatherman group adopts an underground mode of life, producing communiques, setting bombs, and working with other underground and aboveground social movements. A future German filmmaker decides – not without hesitation – not to join some attendees of his Anti-Theater in their first act of political violence, the explosion of a bomb in a major supermarket. He goes on to set up an alternative 'German Hollywood' in his native Munich, while some of these bombers became the key members of the Red Army Faction, joined by a leading radical journalist and another nascent filmmaker.

These fables all concern the constitution of what this book will treat as guerrilla media ecologies in the 1970s. While some of the forms of media creativity and invention that will be mapped here, such as militant and experimental film and video, pirate radio, and radical modes of television fit with conventional common-sense definitions of media, others, such as urban guerrilla groups, do not. Nevertheless, what was at stake in all these ventures was the use of available technical means of expression in order to produce transformative effects, whether these were located on the levels of affect and perception, or on the social or political plane, or, as was frequently the case, on both these levels at once. Why these exploits took place exactly when they did and, conversely, why their radical aims only met with short-term rather than long-term successes, even if they continue to produce tremors and effects on media and political practices and ecologies up to the present, will be some of the key questions guiding this book.

A key supposition in this, following the insights of media archaeology, is that both media inventions and creative social practices are nonlinear and that key developments often take place at the edges, far from the dominant paradigms of the mass media in any given era. This will necessarily be a study then of 'minor' media, a fundamental term for this book that will be expanded upon in chapter one, even if some of the practices involved became, at particular times and locations, central to contemporary media

and political culture. Whether the practices examined culminated in an explosive supernova, or merely percolated in the shadows and are only known beyond the immediate sphere of their participants due to the efforts of later media archaeological attention, all of them can be seen as both ephemeral and essential to the media and sociopolitical mutations that were unfolding in this key period of the late twentieth century.

But what then defines radicality? While the vast majority of media practices and ecologies could be considered minor, since this term is potentially applicable to all non-hegemonic media practices in general, radical media must partake of a transformation of existing, dominant media practices, whether this is understood in aesthetic, perceptual, or political terms. While some of the media ecologies examined in this book could be arguably limited to mere formal, aesthetic, or perceptual experimentation, in many cases this formal experimentation was directly linked to social and political movements and transformative currents. In other cases, this experimentation called for the existence of such currents, in line with the Deleuze and Guattarian formula for minor art addressed to 'the people who are missing', because they are yet to come.¹ Similarly, in the most apparently politically motivated media ecologies such as the urban guerrilla movements or free radios, there were, nevertheless, always examples of aesthetic experimentation with 'form', even if this concerned the form of a programmatic text or a communique or even the 'propaganda of the deed' of a bombing or jailbreak. In all of these cases, the radicality of the practices involved a focus on the idea of an alternative future as a radical and utopian break from both present forms of political domination and dominant media tendencies, even if this was sometimes accompanied by the apparently nihilistic assertion of there being 'no future', as the Sex Pistols so precisely articulated.

Putting together the two terms 'guerrilla' and 'network' is only to seize upon an existing and palpable conjunction in the 1970s of urban guerrilla media tactics from Che Guevara to the only quasi-political project of guerrilla television, diluting the concept enough that it could become fully appropriated simply as an equivalent of DIY entrepreneurialism, or even a justification for neoliberal defunding of arts and cultural sectors of the economy. Nevertheless, in the 1970s, the conjunction between 'guerrilla' actions and media networks was a real and disruptive one, perhaps attaining its fullest cataloguing in the *Handbuch der Kommunikationsguerrilla* (*The Communications Guerrilla Handbook*), subtitled in its Italian translation as 'Tactics of joyful agitation and ludic resistance to oppression' (autonome a.f.r.i.k.a. gruppe et al 2001, p.1). While this catalogue of ludic tactics extends

throughout the twentieth century, its high point and full development of the network form is embodied in actions and experiences ranging from post-Situationist interventions to free radio stations such as Radio Alice in the 1970s. In light of recent critical highlighting of cybernetic network modes of power by Alexander Galloway and others, this might seem a naïve embrace of both ‘communications’ and the network form; however, the conjunction with the term ‘guerrilla’ introduces a profoundly destabilizing and necessarily conflictual element, pointing to other network potentials than the emergence of new modes of cybernetic governance.

Following this initial clarification of what is meant by radical media and guerrilla networks this leaves the final slippery term of media ecologies. Why not speak rather of media practices, their creators or participants, and their audiences or spectators? What does the idea of media ecologies add to conventional methodologies of media research? For this book, the concept of media ecologies is essential for a number of reasons. First of all, it enables a holistic mode of comprehending media practices in the context of their aesthetic, social, political, and subjective surroundings of which the fragmented and fragmenting categories of producers, institutions, audiences, and the phases of media production, distribution, and consumption are incapable. In the case of many of the ecologies that will be examined, this type of breakdown into categories is not only falsifying, but also fails to include key elements of the media ecology, such as existing social and political movements and their repression, or modes of technological innovation and their pragmatic (mis)use and processes of (radical) subjectivation.

None of these media experiences took place in a vacuum; rather, they resulted from the intense interconnections of many factors, technological, social, political, subjective, affective, and perceptual. At the same time, the recapitulation of all these different elements of a given ecology and their relations is, at best, a highly complex and, at worst, an impossible task, given how ephemeral many of these media practices were and what few traces remain of them. Also bearing in mind that incorporeal components such as affect and modes of subjectivity are just as important as technologies and material media artifacts, the reconstruction of a past media ecology is necessarily as much a matter of imagination, creativity, and speculation as it is an historically verifiable procedure. Following insights adapted from media archaeology, these media ecologies persist less as stable archives and more as ‘anarchives’ (cf. Ernst 2014, pp. 139-140), that is to say, unstable collections of textual, material, and audiovisual fragments that are as revealing in their gaps and absences as in their remaining material traces.

Nevertheless, in all cases, these media experiences will be treated as ecologies – even if many of their components are now missing – rather than as isolated practices, using as many artifacts, secondary sources, and accounts of participants as are available. The art of media archaeology and ecology is to construct a coherent world out of these fragments, which is not necessarily a true world in any verifiable sense, but one that is, nevertheless, a consistent presentation of the radical and utopian worlds that these radical media ecologies attempted to construct.