

Internet, activism and tactical media

Practices of resistance and enthusiasm in Brazil

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Motivated by the theories of Richard Stallman, Lawrence Lessig, Geert Lovink and David Garcia, Brazilian Internet users, activists and artists are, more and more, developing attractive activism and tactical media projects.

Many consider themselves as «tactical media», the term, spread in the 90s by David Garcia and Geert Lovink, is a categorization for those works considered alternative, a protest or counter-culture. This happened when the media became cheap and began to be used by a great part of the population. It is when no longer only the experts of a medium were using it. The prices went down and the sizes got smaller. The «do-it-yourself media», David Garcia calls it, when the consumer becomes a producer of the media. It could be from homemade video to website development.

Tactical media is not a new concept, its practices are known for decades, the difference is that before it was not labelled. One of the critics about the terminology is that it includes all kinds of experimental and protest practices. And, progressively, it is broadening the range of acceptable works in this category. As an opposition, or sometimes as a complementation, to the tactics there are the strategic projects, the ones that contribute for a long-term process of information, development and social change.

The works to be here presented are practices of activism, media critique and do-it-yourself in Brazil. They use the media in a provocative

and questioning way, and on the Internet they gather to create oppositional projects. Not as an opposition to power but also as creation of new power on the net. Many of them work with projects on digital inclusion and learning. A job of not only to propitiate the access to the net but their ambition is also to instigate creation and critical use of the medium. They use the media on different forms and patterns in order to transform in something new, experimental, and occasionally, creating noise and disturbance.

The range of tactical media and activism projects is enormous, as its definition, it goes from poster manipulation on the streets to hacktivism. This paper proposes to only speak about projects that use Internet, having an illustration of each of the popular segments found. Some examples are *Mídia Tática Brasil*, *Auto Labs*, *IP://Interface Pública*, *Recicle 1 político*, *Colab*, *Radio livre*, *Rede viva favela*, *Contra TV*, *Re:combo*, *Escola do Futuro*, *Centro de Mídia Independente*.

The projects vary from vindication web pages to digital inclusion, community, collective creation, pirate and net radio, discussions and actions. Using technologies like wiki, blog, forum, RSS, XML, and supported by licenses like free software, *GNU FDL*, *Creative Commons* and *Copyleft*, these projects in Brazil are examples of resistance and enthusiasm. They are actions of resistances to the *status quo*, to the capitalism, to the globalisation, and they do that with an appealing enthusiasm.

A tactical media event

In 2003 a group called *Mídia Tática Brasil* (<http://www.midiatatica.org>) organized an event in São Paulo, Brazil, to discuss, present and create tactical media in the country. It was a Brazilian version of the *Next5Minutes* festival¹. Even though they had almost no budget for the festival, they could get a great repercussion on the mass media. One of the factors, according to Ricardo Rosas, one of the festival's coordinator, was that Gilberto Gil accepted the invitation to be in the event. Gil, besides being a singer and pro copyleft, is the Brazilian Culture Minister, what, of course, attracted the conventional media. The festival brought together many of the activists, artists and theorist from Brazil and abroad. After the four days of happenings, lectures, discussions they realized there was much being done... And a lot more to be done.

The same group continued working with tactical media concepts and created a project called *AutoLabs* (<http://www.midiatatica.org/autolabs>), as they say: «laboratories of critical literacy on new technologies based on concepts of tactical media». There were workshops with teenagers from the suburbs of São Paulo creating open radio, collaborative narratives, music and computer recycling. When interviewed, Gisele Vasconcelos, the project coordinator, said that their main goal is not only to teach the new media, but before that to create in the young people a critical view of the media. The emphasis of the project is the consciousness of the media and its use. The teenagers are always asks «what for» every time they want to produce something.

Free software

Many of these practices can also be considered as alternative, as Graham Meikle defines alternative media as independent, with

a different point of view from the main media, and propitiate a horizontal link among its audience. Meikle², in his book *Future active: media activism and the Internet*, considers free software as the main resistance to the commercialisation of internet. In Brazil this is a growing movement.

Richard Stallman, the advocate of free software, believes that free software is not only a way of creating software; it is also a political statement. The value of freedom is implicit in everything related to the movement. They are creating «a system based on voluntary cooperation and on decentralization.»³

The government in Brazil has supported the movement, therefore, increasing its force. They are planning change all software on government computers to free and open source software. With support of the political leaders, the movement is flourishing in the country. The Minister of Culture, Gilberto Gil, is one of its supporters and, in 2004, he launched a music with no copyright⁴. This is a scenery of resistance, as the one stated by Meikle.

Continuing the thoughts of Stallman, Lawrence Lessig⁵ wrote a book called *Free Culture* where he discusses freedom and copyright. He defends a space for free speech. Internet could be this place, he alerts, although, to the fact that some ISP do not allow its clients to have a server at home.

The do-it-yourself (DIY) from the 90s

Going back to the 90s, the beginning of the internet in Brazil, one of the great examples of the DIY was the «I hate...» pages. The web was seen as a free place for people state their opinions and the «I hate...» web pages were its practice. It was like the graphite on the web, people were creating web pages saying they were not satisfied with a company or a product. Usually it was when someone

bought a product and it was not what he or she expected. Many of these web pages got popular and reached the mass media. Their message was coming across not only by their poorly made website but also by the news generated about them. It was a sort of fad; there were hundreds of those pages. They were from pages hating multinational companies to politicians, soccer teams and TV stars. Many were hosted in *GeoCities* and in a Brazilian server called *HPG (Home Page Gratis)*, as the name says, it was for free. In a way, Hpg was better than geocities because, at that time, it was in Portuguese. The Internet of the 21st century became more commercial. A big portal bought HPG and nowadays they charge to host sites, consequently, the majority of these pages disappeared. Only a few examples of the «I hate» pages can still be found⁶.

The DIY from nowadays, blogs and content management system (CMS)

A more recent version of the DIY is the blog. It is easy to create, publish and update. People have it as an open space to state their opinion. As an improved version of those Geocities and Hpg pages, they link to each other creating a network of content and people. Through this links, the richest thing about blogs, an alternative way to find information is created. Thus, Blogs are an alternative way «spread the word». There is a great number of blogs and photoblogs in Brazil; it turns out to be a way of expressing and representing oneself online.

Other versions of DIY, but a bit more complex, are the content management systems (CMS) and wikis. They are used to create portals and manage an online community. Many small and/or low budget groups that before had no possibility to generate such portal now are using those systems. Examples go from *MetaONG* (<http://www.metaong.info>), a website for people and projects of the

third sector, to *Colab* (<http://www.colab.info>) and *Metareciclagem* (<http://www.metareciclagem.com.br/wiki>), a portal for collaborative projects and a wiki on recycling computers.

Almost all of these projects use some sort of syndication (RSS or XML) what helps them to keep their readers updated with their content. The linking and syndication are the approach that these DIY of nowadays use to create their networks and tell their message.

Practices, resistance and enthusiasm

Navigating through the websites, interviewing the people, contributing to their projects, it flourishes a sensation of resistance and enthusiasm. The projects are a way to rebel and change a bit the social problems in the country.

Resistance can be seen on digital inclusion programs; they try to not only give access to the medium but also to generate a critical view of it. There are hundreds of them in the country. Some of the important ones are *LIDEC* (<http://www.cidec.futuro.usp.br>), and *Parque Digital*⁷.

«People are willing to participate on different projects», said Tatiana Wells, the coordinator of a project called *IP://Interface Pública*, in an interview (8). She believes that sometimes the problem is that people discuss much and do little.

Another important project to mention is *Re: combo* (<http://www.recombo.art.br>), a collaborative audiovisual piece. On the website people can, for example, download music, remix and upload it back again. The motivation for the project is, according to Mabuse, one of the creators, to use the real potential of the net: «the remote collaborative work». In 2004 they created with *Creative Commons* a sampling license called *Re:combo* (9). One

of their goals is to propagate copyleft in Brazil.

As *Re:combo*, there are several other collectives and communities broadcasting free content on the net. Many of them are net and/or community radios that use the Internet to exchange information and programs with other radios. *Radio livre* (<http://www.radiolivre.org>) and *Rede viva favela* (<http://www.redevivafavela.com.br>) are examples of that.

Felipe Fonseca, from *Colab*, when interviewed about his projects on the web, said he believes «there are some people willing to learn, and there is a lot to be done in terms of system interaction, information architecture and usability to facilitate these people to use interconnected environments, to identify people with the similar interests and to solve their own problems.»(10)

Based on these and many other statements heard on interviews or read on project's website, it is effortless to get the feeling of enthusiasm. All the projects are made essentially by people: people with energy, people that dedicate their time and own resources, people that collaborate, people that, in a way, believe, and believe in a social change.

NOTAS

1. N5M is an internationally known tactical media festival held in Europe every 3 years <http://www.next5minutes.org>
2. Meikle, Graham. *Future active : Media activism and the internet*. Media.Culture series. Annandale, N.S.W. New York, N.Y.: Pluto Press 2002.
3. Stallman, Richard. *Free software, free society: Selected essays of richard stallman*. Edited by Joshua Gay. Boston: GNU Press. 2002. P.131
4. A wired magazine article on <http://www.ired.com/wired/archive/12.11/linux.html>
5. Lessig, Lawrence. *Free culture: How big media uses technology and the law to lock down culture and control creativity*. New York: Penguin Press 2004
6. Here there is a list of website <http://www.geocities.com/SunsetStrip/Stadium/8444/>
7. Web: <http://www.marketinghacker.com.br/beclue/wakka.php?wakka=ProjetoParqueDigital>
8. Tatiana Wells was interviewed by email by Karla Brunet <http://www.co-network.net/entrev/entr03.htm>
9. <http://creativecommons.org/weblog/entry/4234>
10. Felipe Fonseca was interviewed by email by Karla Brunet <http://www.co-network.net/entrev/entr02.htm>



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