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## **Multiplicity: The legacies of tactical media**

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*Do not make one, where there are many..*

The term Tactical Media emerged in the middle 1990s to designate a growing area of media production that was neither main-stream, fringe, nor art, and that simultaneously did not want to limit itself to either new media or to more established forms of media.

The classic definition of Tactical Media comes from David Garcia and Geert Lovink, writing in the wake of the second edition of the Next 5 Minutes festival, early in 1997 (1):

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*“Tactical Media are what happens when the cheap ‘do it yourself’ media, made possible by the revolution in consumer electronics and expanded forms of distribution (from public access cable to the internet) are exploited by groups and individuals who feel aggrieved by or excluded from the wider culture. Tactical media do not just report events, as they are never impartial they always participate and it is this that more than anything separates them from mainstream media.” (2)*

This description puts a strong emphasis on the d.i.y. (do it yourself) aspect of the term. Tactical Media is understood here as the moment when a multiplicity of people appropriates the camera (the classic tool of media production) and sometimes quite literally turns it around - to point at themselves, to allow their particular story to be heard. This democratising aspiration in the field of media production was always central to Tactical Media’s project. It aimed not simply to critique dominant power or challenge dominant cultural forms and ideas, but to make the unheard voices heard on their own terms was the real claim that Tactical Media wished to stake.

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In the middle 1990s the scene at which Tactical Media had appeared, was already changing drastically. Technological experimentation which had always been an important aspect of Tactical Media, was becoming increasingly important with the rise of the internet. David Garcia often refers back to the Seropositive Ball (1990), a major media and networking event staged at Amsterdam's Paradiso cultural stage, one of the birthplaces of the Next 5 Minutes festival series, as a moment when activism (the global aids awareness movement), d.i.y. media, and technological experimentation with nascent communication technologies fused almost seamlessly.

While the 1993 edition of Next 5 Minutes still ran under the banner of 'tactical television', by 1996 and in the second edition of the festival, the title-tag had already shifted to 'tactical media', not just to allow radio in as an important tactical medium, but especially to acknowledge the growing importance of the internet and the world wide web. While the internet had previously been primarily a communication medium (e-mail, newsgroups, on-line discussion and more), with the emergence of the world wide web as a graphic interface the emphasis was shifting to new forms of publication, accessible to a theoretically limitless global audience (although at that time access was of course rather limited, but we know how much this has changed since).

## **Pervasive change**

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In parallel with the explosive growth of the internet from the middle 1990s onwards the position of what was once a rather obscure form of media practice, do it yourself media, has completely changed. In 2001 I was invited to write a short essay for a book about the Liverpool Superchannel project, a community web-tv project set up by the media arts organisation FACT Liverpool and the excellent Superflex artist collective from Copenhagen. I used the phrase “mediate yourself” in this text to indicate the do-it-yourself dimension of the project - in this case the web casts were produced by the tenants of Coronation Court, Liverpool's oldest tower block(3) as it went into renovation. Highlighting this crucial aspect served in part to distinguish what was happening here from mainstream media practices, still mostly associated with professional forms of media production at the time.

The shift we have witnessed since then is that from “mediate yourself” to “broadcast yourself”. What was once an obscure corner of the media universe has now become one of the most central and most visible public avenues. Do it yourself media are rapidly becoming the norm rather than the aberration. These home produced media messages operate in the same system of circulation (youtube) as for instance the widely viewed campaign speeches of Barrack Obama, which reached more US viewers on-line than via traditional broadcast television channels, even in absolute numbers.

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In many ways this reversal of roles was unthinkable in the middle 1990s. Of course, the home brewed, often amateurish, and sometimes obscure self-made videos never reach the number of eyeballs Obama's famous speech on race in the US has received. Still, the fact that self-publication and self-mediation have achieved such a massive presence must mean something for the status of these messages. The old idea of the hermetic media fortress where immensely powerful gatekeepers kept out any unwarranted voices or opinions, has given way to an ocean of signals, a multiplicity of voices in which every singular opinion is expressed and can be found, but where they tend to drown into the oblivion of the multitude. Formerly a radical intervention, subsequently a community centred operation, do it yourself media now have become 'vernacular', they constitute the radical practice of everyday life, so unparticular that it can hardly be consciously perceived as anything out of the ordinary anymore. That is a truly remarkable shift.

## **Technological lineages**

Technological experimentation did not stop at breaking open the internet for average citizens. Far from it. One of the most remarkable social experiments, largely self-organised, is the emergence of the open source and free software movement(s). Exploiting the distributed nature of the internet and its many to many information sharing capabilities, coders around the planet started to work together

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on creating new and open software platforms that embodied many of the political aspirations of Tactical Media. Open source and free software tools allow an enormous variety of groups, organisations and individuals to set up their own publication and communication environments on the internet, and in many ways even more effectively embody the principle of making unheard voices be heard. Countless of community experiments have emerged, but also main-stream technologies used by millions of citizens around the globe are in wide circulation today.

While the radical free software and open source software groups and initiatives became a more important focus area for Tactical Media the two can in no way be equated to each other. Older and newer media forms persist side by side in the universe of Tactical Media, while the free software and open source phenomenon spans an even wider field of activity. Still, we notice that even today some of the more radical coding communities and groups do feel that their activity is part of an enlarged idea of tactical media.

Between and within these coding cultures intense debates rage and different tribes have formed. Debates typically revolve around the question of whether code should be free for any form of appropriation, including commercial uses, but also political uses that would be entirely abject to the original creators of the software. The radical free model dismisses any and all of these debates as ill-founded. The technology itself needs to be free in use as well as in its source code so that it can be appropriated to any and all causes. The decision as to which use is deemed 'appropriate' and which not is best left to general deliberation of society at large.

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Others would rather specify the uses to which their code may be subjected and to which not. They often deride the radical positions of the 'radically free' as both politically and economically naive and even irresponsible. Hate speech, crime, pornographic exploitation are some of the more shady uses to which radically free software tools can be appropriated (like any other 'tool' for that matter). It would in short be wrong to draw a singular picture of the open source and free software landscape. Its imbrications with Tactical Media are only partial, but there are definite and persistent legacies here.

## **From open source to open content**

The question of open infrastructure and production tools, open channels for voices of difference and

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contestation or radical singularity has taken another important turn even more recently, following the emergence of open and free software cultures on the scene. It can be summarised as the move from open source to open content. Here the technological questions recede to the background, while another figure comes to the fore: the spectre of Intellectual Property Rights, characterised by some as the “Oil of the 21st Century”(4). The idea of open content wishes to use the capacity of digital technologies to make information resources, including rich media resources, easily copyable, freely viewable, and widely publishable at minimal costs - preferably on a global and unrestricted scale.

The greatest impediment to the creation of such globally accessible open and free resources of knowledge, information and media documents is currently not strictly technological, but primarily related to the legal questions of intellectual ownership rights, and the economics of the creation of open resources and their maintenance. Most of the world’s most valuable knowledge is tied up with commercial and strategic interests of strategic institutional actors that are vehemently opposed to open access for obvious reasons. Whether these are the commercial interests of (science) publishing companies and information brokers, or the strategic imperatives of government agencies. Here a new battlefield is drawn that incorporates growing areas of human activity and knowledge production. These include such vital domains as DNA sequencing and pharmaceutical knowledge increasingly locked up by private patenting and other legal constructs.

The benefit of globally accessible information and knowledge resources for human development, if only for the continued struggles against hunger and disease are self-evident. Large initiatives and organisations are active in this field, creating what is often referred to as a global information commons, the most well-known probably being the Creative Commons project and its descendant the Science Commons, but many other initiatives exist today(5). In the process of creating these new public (on-line) resources these initiatives take over some of the public information provision

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functions traditionally held by libraries, museums and archives, now translated to the digital domain.

The struggle over ownership and public access to information and knowledge as evidenced in these and many other open content projects (is there anybody out there who never heard of wikipedia?) is intense and even widely reported in mainstream media. While the reference to Tactical Media is not immediately evident even for many involved in these projects and initiatives themselves, their democratising aspiration for the information and media age are clearly in line with those of Tactical Media. Many of these open content initiatives inherited the do- it yourself approach from Tactical Media and its predecessors.

Given this proliferation of activity, the diversity of practices and the multiplicity of media and technological cultures that can be witnessed today, the question has rightfully been asked what the significance or indeed meaning of the term 'Tactical Media' still is today. It would be a historical mistake to try and squeeze this multiplicity in a singular concept. We should understand the lineages of media and technological culture much rather as a process in continuous becoming, without a bedrock origin, or a set destination. Tactical Media has always been nomadic, in line with Michel de Certeau's conception of the tactical as a temporary nomadic operation on the strategic terrain determined by strategic power. Fixation would simply mean the death of Tactical Media.

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Our response, as some of the people involved in the Next 5 Minutes festival series (1993 - 2003) that coined and staged the concept of Tactical Media, has been to cherish this multifariousness of legacies. Rather than impose a singular reading, we decided to create a memory for these fleeting and impermanent tactical operations (currently still under construction). We call it The "Tactical Media Files"(6), a living archive for Tactical Media". A living archive because we hope to deploy it as an active documentation tool for the multiplicity of practices that from time to time still like to identify themselves as 'Tactical Media'.

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(1) [www.n5m.org](http://www.n5m.org)

(2) David Garcia & Geert Lovink, "The ABC of Tactical Media", posted on the international nettime mailing list, May 16, 1997. Archive at: [www.nettime.org](http://www.nettime.org)

(3) The project was later renamed to Tenant Spin and is still on-line: [www.tenantspin.org](http://www.tenantspin.org)

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(4) See: The Oil of the 21st Century- Perspectives on Intellectual Property- <http://oil21.org>

(5) For an overview of commons initiatives the blog website On the Commons is highly informative:  
[www.onthecommons.org](http://www.onthecommons.org)

(6) [www.tacticalmediafiles.net](http://www.tacticalmediafiles.net)



TACTICAL MEDIA