A Pirate Utopia for Tactical Television

From: "david garcia" <davidg@mail.xs4all.nl>

A Pirate Utopia for Tactical Television

David Garcia

In recent years Amsterdam has become known for its free-net the Digital City. Less well known but in some ways equally remarkable has been the emergence of Amsterdam's radical movement for public access television.This text is just a beginning, a highly selective historical snap shot.

Special Conditions

Amsterdam is one of the only television networks in the world that has been able to carry some of the anarchic principles of the net onto the old (but still overwhelmingly dominant) broadcast medium of television.

This has been possible only because the following unusual combination of conditions apply.

To begin with, cable in Holland is not a luxury but a utility. Anyone with a tv in Amsterdam can receive the open channels. However radical or extreme the message, the maker can in principle reach the whole tv audience of the city, unlike most cable channels in North America it is not part of a "gated zone".

Second; with two open channels available 24 hours a day, there is enough space for anyone who wants to transmit to be able do so. Third; there is no quality control. Programs can be produced with the most basic consumer equipment and contain the most explicit material. Fourth; live transmissions, which are an essential requirement for a genuine communications medium, are a routine occurrence in Amsterdam. Fifth; there are generally resources and support available to help those who want to produce technically, artistically or socially ambitious projects. Lastly; there is the nature of the city itself, a multilingual port of call for transients from around the world, with a rich history of media piracy. Amsterdam is a global village if ever there was one.

With the intensity of a major metropolis it is actually quite small. Those watching tv at home are quite often within cycling distance of the studio.

All these factors combine to allow Amsterdam television to be an intimate communications medium rather than a traditional mass broadcast medium.

There is however a price to pay. Much of the output is shamelessly bad. The quality controls that normally filter the "noise from the signal" have been minimised or even suspended. In Amsterdam we practice television in the faint hope that "Noise is just the price we pay for signal. that without junk there is less chance for real quality to emerge....".

New Developments

Having two open channels instead of just one is a recent development and a vital one. Over the years the number of groups wanting to make television has grown to such an extent that cable time was becoming clogged.

In January 96 a new community access channel, Amsterdam 1, was launched it coincided with The Next 5 Minutes conference on tactical media.

The organisers of the Next 5 Minutes seized the opportunity of the new channel to provide

themselves (and more importantly the visiting tactical television makers) with not only 24 hour live television throughout the three day conference but also the chance to experiment with the multiple perspectives offered by live parallel programming on the two channels simultaneously.

Although extreme, this was just the latest example in a long line of public events in which groups, who are completely outside of the mainstream media industry, have used the unique Amsterdam cable infrastructure to make watching and making television into an integral part of a live event. A situation that offers this kind of unique media access does not come out of the blue.

Many of the visitors to The Next 5 Minutes must have imagined that they were witnessing a typical, one off, example of Dutch liberalism, this is only partly true. In some ways it is not a national but a strictly local, that is an Amsterdam, phenomenon. It comes on the back of a hedonistic, multicultural, chaotic, frequently incompetent but occasionally groundbreaking tactical television scene that has been evolving for over twenty years. A Twenty year collective experiment in the emancipatory and euphoric potential of electronic communications culture.

A Brief History

Amsterdam's tactical media scene is largely a product of the alternative political and cultural movements that began in the 60's and culminated in the Dutch squatting movement of the 70's. The Dutch squatters were never just about housing they had a far broader political agenda and their campaigns had a significant long term impact, most visibly in the shaping of the local media policy.

The Netherlands was the first country in Europe to have a nation wide, cable tv infrastructure. Unlike most other countries cable was is not considered a luxury but a utility like gas, water and electricity. If you have tv in 99% of cases you have cable. But strangely, despite this privileged technological position, the Dutch media law had become so calcified that it was to be many years before it would be legal to generate local programming. In those early days cable was simply used to improve picture quality and as a way to import programs from other European countries (and later the global media MTV, SKY CNN etc.). Only artists and pirates consistently and effectively challenged this ludicrous state of affairs.

Pirates

Apart from specially organised experiments by visual artists the key players were a group of media pirates who emerged from the squatting movement's exuberant cultural scene in the late 70s'. Most notably PKP who later became Rabotnik. Some like Radio 100 and Patapou still remain defiantly pirates.

Anyone visiting Amsterdam in the 70's and early 80's would have found a that some of the best places in town were the squatted bars and clubs and if they had stayed longer and looked deeper they would have also found a vivid squatter's media, of news papers, zines, pirate radio stations, and television.

Technically it was simple. The pirates Just set up transmitters near the large parabolic dish used by the cable operator and simply beamed in their illegal transmissions, which were then automatically spread city wide. The programs they made were both very popular and highly innovative.

The popularity of the pirates made it clear to the city authorities that a legal framework would have to be created. The framework that emerged was the so called Open Channel. This was to be administered and regulated by a government appointed organisation, SALTO. So ultimately although the whole of the Netherlands has cable only Amsterdam has a genuine community access system. And we owe this to the pirates and to the artists.

Although we need freedom, television, unlike the net cannot be a free for all. There has to be some structure and in the case of Amsterdam it is imposed by SALTO. SALTO is the controlling power behind Amsterdam local television and radio. It's statutory obligation is to make the open channel culturally representative. In other words ensure that the main ethnic and social groups and movements are visible. It is this approach is that distinguishes community access from public access

which is open to anybody and is based on a simple first come first served principal. Public access is the dominant system in the US, the birth place of open channels on cable. It is also the model followed by the Berlin Open Channel, the only major city in Europe with a public access policy attempting to approach Amsterdam's in scale or ambition.

Tactical Media and the Political Establishment.

Over the last decade the SALTO model has given rise to a rich cultural mix and sporned some strange alliances between local government and tactical television makers. This process began in earnest 1989 when the municipality asked former pirates, Stads TV Rabotnik to cover the results of the local elections.

Of the many groups making work for the open channel, Rabotnik are one of the few groups that have retained their identity from the old pirate days. Their deep roots in the life of the streets enables them to reflect the cities distinctive feel better than most.

During the elections their talent for directness and improvisation was used to particularly good effect as they succeeded in totally subverting the usual drone of dry political analysis. The major Dutch national daily, NRC Handlesblad certainly felt they had succeeded, comparing them favourably to national television's failure, claiming that they had succeeded in putting the drama of real local concerns back into the political process.

Next 5 Minutes

Three years later a number of us who had been active in Amsterdam tactical media over the years started wondering how many groups from around the world believed, like us, in television as a participatory and emancipatory tool. We knew of random examples like Social Dialogue's samizdat media from Romania, or the Gay Men's Health Crisis' whose weekly programs, Living With AIDS, provided a weekly diet of information on Manhattan cable. We knew there was more, but how much more? To answer this question a conference of "tactical media" was organised. A conference designed to bring together as many of those who were involved in democratisation of television together, as possible. It didn't matter whether they came from the so called mainstream or the so called alternative scene. In fact our desire to subvert these fixed dichotomies was our reason for introducing the term "tactical television".

The resulting event, the first Next 5 Minutes, took place in 1993, the year when the digital connectivity revolution entered popular consciousness as "wired" culture. For many of those involved the first Next 5 Minutes was a rare utopian moment when fragments seemed to come together, forming a pattern that both illuminated the present and clarified the past.

More practically, on a local level the profile and importance of tactical tv was immeasurably raised. Many groups who had never worked together before, have continued to do so since. And live television transmissions by tactical practitioners ceased to be a rarity and became routine.

Certain ideas that emerged from the event, such as a translocal network of tactical tv makers have since been integrated into Dutch national broadcasting in the form of VPRO's World Receiver. This project is a monthly program which features and commissions work from tactical tv makers from around the world.

A Digital City

Although this story is primarily about television the birth of the Digital City in 94 has been such a powerful influence on the local tactical media that it cannot be passed over. In fact its impact nationally and internationally has eclipsed all the other projects which have emerged from Amsterdam's tactical media scene.

Born in 94 at the time of a new cycle of European, national and local elections, Digital City grew out of an alliance between on the one hand, a part of the squatters tradition that had gone mainstream, embodied by Marleen Sticker of De Balie, and on the other hand Hacktic a younger generation of

former hackers and operators of the xs4all internet server.

Cleverly they used the elections as a fund raising opportunity, claiming that it was "conducting an experiment about the relationship between citizens and politics in the electronic age". In fact they were doing something far more.

They were establishing a viable Amsterdam free net, with public terminals that would turn out to be one of the most effective models for public access computer networking in Europe.

However this early association of the Digital City with the elections was misleading. It lead to many misunderstandings between the organisers and users who expected the city to itself be a democratic organisation. One of the directors Joost Flynt later attempted to defend their position as a benevolent autocracy thus" For me the Digital City is not a medium and it has no editor.

But there is a management. The city metaphor might sometimes be misleading. The system is one could say, not organised democratically. It is a project managed almost like a company. The management group establishes the framework (do not exceed 1 MB), but we do not determine what information goes where. Some users think they must have the final say . I read the newspaper but I do not dispute its proper. I go to the library but I do not feel like I am owning it. It is annoying if a small group dispute your authority over a facility which is offered free of charge".

Whatever the political arguments and power struggles the project was from the beginning an outstanding popular success. It gave many Dutch citizens their first taste of the Internet and created a key reference point for national discussion on civic networking. Moreover its success acts as a counter weight to the popular view that government investment has no role to play in the communications revolution.

Despite bumps along the way the Digital City has continued to evolve not only in its appearance, moving from a gopher menu to sophisticated 3-D graphics, but more importantly in the complexity and richness of its social organisation.

As local internet access grows exponentially so do the number of new inhabitants of the city with approximately 200 new members a day. Like any real city it is not one community but a "local assembly of virtual communities". In fact a significant chunk of the traffic not only comes from outside Amsterdam but from outside of the Netherlands. There are many Dutch ex-patriots who retain a social life in Holland via the cafes and the MUDS of the DDS. Or even through reading and contributing to the DDS citizens newspaper.

The contacts between inhabitants are not only virtual many of the on-line groups particularly those from the MUD known as the Metro and the Central cafe make a point of meeting regularly in real life.

Currently various experimental refinements are being tested, for example Cafes that were once separated by themes are now being turned into one big cafe with many tables on which different the themes are discussed.

(For a fuller discussion on DDS the text written by Geert Lovink in 95 for the symposium Wired World).

Zoo TV and Beyond

At the same time as the Digital City was being born an even more marginal group were also benefiting from the new cycle of elections. To the astonishment of many, The Hoeksteen Live (by far the most anarchic and controversial tactical tv group in Amsterdam), were invited by a department of the Amsterdam City Council, to televise a day long political fare, De Stad Viseurs. In this fare, local activists placed their ideas and campaigns for Amsterdam's future on stalls, literally a market place of ideas. Politicians would be invited to meet activists and hopefully begin to bridge the gulf between the formal political parties and the growing numbers who though politically active feel alienated from the traditional political process.

The Hoeksteen was chosen because it was felt that its efforts to demystify television would chime well with the De Stad Viseurs attempt to demystify the political process. In the event disagreements resulted in two members of the regular Hoeksteen team, splitting off and creating a temporary alliance of various other local tv groups to form a new entity Beurs TV. Generally they retained the Hoeksteen's approach of "tactical fundamentalism" in other words making live television using only consumer electronics, with everything delivered by "bakfiets"(bicycle powered carts) and tram. They did however expand their communications system to include view phones that were placed in cafes, for people to call in to Beurs tv and speak their minds or to question politicians.

These kinds of alliances between members of a political establishment and tactical media activists are difficult to imagine outside of Amsterdam.

Hoeksteen or The End of Television as we Know it.

The Hoeksteen Live is one of the most peculiar entities in Amsterdam's tactical media landscape. Started five years ago by Colombian visual artist Raul Marroquin. The real breakthrough occurred a year later, when Marroquin discovered that there was a television injection point, in one of SALTO's radio studios which meant that for the rental price of the cheapest radio studio (at that time 1$ an hour) he had a direct feed for making live television.

Overnight the Hoeksteen was transformed into a monthly, non stop, all night party on tv. Produced entirely with consumer equipment, cheap camcorders combined with improvised graphics from Amiga computers. Recently industrial and consumer conferencing equipment has also been incorporated allowing live tv connections both to other cities in the Netherlands and also to other parts of the world. Last week they made a connection to a couple of media theorists in the Gertrude Stein Institute in New York and In the coming program Richard Barbrook from The Hypermedia Centre in Westminster University, will be hooked up to them Hoeksteen, live from Cyberia in London. Not bad for no budget television.

Hoeksteen has a significant audience because from the outset it could attract celebrities. The combined social talents of Marroquin and the its former chief anchor man, Otto Valkman ensured that anyone from Philip Glass to a cabinet minister was likely to turn up. The essence of the program is an atmosphere of unpredictability, a well known member of parliament told me that on one occasion even she has been handed the camera and been press ganged into the production unit. On another occasion the chief anchorman responded to a request (or a dare) from a late night phone in by pulling out his dick and measured it on screen in.

It is how one might imagine Warhol's factory (before Valerie Solanis) a platform for the city's extremes of exhibitionism and voyeurism. An all night party with a continuous stream of gate crashers. But unlike the Factory which comes down to us as film and photography Marroquin's studio goes out on live tv!

When I put this warholian comparison to Marroquin he was to quick to point out that "Warhol didn't have mainstream politicians" . With a straight face he went on to describe the Hoeksteen as a political program with a cultural supplement. Geert Lovink's description is more accurate "high society for low media".

Recently Hoeksteen's most public face Otto Valkman died. He had been ill with cancer for many months but until very near the end he continued to appear on the Hoeksteen. He even announced his imminent death on the program and was rewarded with an immediate flood of phone calls of commiseration. To see his physical deterioration, month by month in the subsequent programs sounds ghoulish but that is never how it appeared. Unwilling to retire gracefully he continued doing what made him feel most alive, being live, on television.

The Hoeksteen represents the best and the worst of the Amsterdam media situation. In creating a community access tv environment that mirrors the anarchic diversity of the net, Amsterdam viewers often have the doubtful privilege witnessing mainstream media's nightmare scenario, disintegration. The end of television, on television. In some senses the worse it gets the more it succeeds.

Currently at The Centre for Tactical Media we are trying to imagine ways of improving Amsterdam's tactical television without killing it. Till now the achievement has been the collective creation of an inspiring framework. But like the oyster we need more grit if we are to be left with more than an empty shell. Amsterdam television could be great but at present it seems to be trapped, unable to escape the defects of its qualities.