A Critical Study of Informal
New Media Uses in Sweden

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Abstract

This study looks at a variety of "informal" uses of new media and ICTs. The term informal describes popular uses of digital technologies that often exist outside the norms, laws, and codes that dictate how digital technologies and networks are to be used. Such activities include what is commonly described as "piracy," but also embrace different peer-to-peer practices. Informal activities develop due to the affordances of digital technologies, which allow space for creativity and personalization of use, but are also due to broader sociocultural variables and contextual issues. In general terms, informal activities are those that concern the amateur activities of people using digital programs, tools, and networks. Media scholars see great potential in new media/ICT affordances, as related to the proliferation of grassroots participation, communication, and creativity. Nevertheless, a growing critical literature forces us to examine the actualization of such potential. This paper discusses the aforementioned issues by looking at new media/ICT uses in Sweden; it departs from critical perspectives that take into consideration the political economy of new media, and the cultural-political critiques of late-modern consumer societies.

Keywords: New media, informalization, ICT, civic culture, Sweden, late capitalism

Social Potentialities and Limitations of New Media and ICTs

This paper studies "informal" new media uses, from a critical and empirical perspective, by employing relevant literature on the promises of new media and everyday life culture, and by interviewing various people engaged with different informal new media/ICT activities in Sweden. By new media and ICTs, I refer to portable, mass-produced and consumed digital devices (for example, tablets, smartphones, or laptops among other), and a variety of software programs and applications that enable individuals to do things on their own or with others. I am also including digital portals, platforms, the so-called social media, communicational networks, as well as peer-to-peer structures and open-source/free software systems and licenses enabled by digital technologies. These elements bring important changes to social life; they alter the ways in which we perceive the world, the ways we work, the ways we inform ourselves and learn new skills, and the ways that politics are performed by authorities and by citizens. Informal activities through digital technologies, systems, and networks not only include what is commonly described as "piracy," but also hacking and various peer-to-peer (P2P) practices. In broader terms, informal activities are those that concern the amateur activities of people using digital programs, tools, and networks, which can lead to the production of a new culture of communicating, producing, consuming, or distributing.

The study is particularly interested in critically assessing the civic and "socially progressive" potentialities that media scholars see developing through new media/ICT affordances, which are related to participation, communication, and creativity. These possibilities are often viewed as key variables for the further development of social modernization; the deepening of democracy and citizenship; the humanization of work in capitalism or the revival of communities; and the creation of understanding and intimate social relations among different people sharing different identities.

Indeed, various scholars (Jenkins 2006; Castells 2009; Gauntlett 2011) express great optimism for what the advent of new media networks and communication technologies means for societies and individuals across the globe. New media are often seen as the tools required to further modernize societies, or to develop Beck's (1996) "second modernity" or Giddens' "high modernity," as they relate to the advance of reflexive individuals and reflexive societies (Giddens 1991; Webster 2006: 203; Gauntlett 2008: 123). New media/ICTs provide rich resources for the development of reflexive subjectivity that can allow individuals to understand their time challenges, and to monitor themselves, others, and institutions. For example, Beck (2002) talks about problems with the risks posed by the globalized society with its connections to international conflicts and cultural encounters between different people. In a similar fashion, Giddens also discusses a variety of high-modern challenges, such as surveillance, war, ecology, and poverty.

Scholars, as well as focusing on the democratic (other than the modernizing) possibilities of the Internet and its digital tools, also look at the concrete instances of politicization of the subversive potentials of the Internet with broader issues that relate to identity, class, exclusion, and exploitation. Scholars (for example, Dahlgren 2005: 147) note the civic potential of the Internet in fostering public spheres of political communication, representation, deliberation, or agonism. Activists use digital media to create autonomous spaces of "imagination and creativity, contingent, open and unpredictable [...] that continuously acknowledge difference" (Fenton 2012: 166). The open nature of new media and ICTs allows possibilities for political participation and representation, inclusion and equality. It may thus deepen democratic structures by cultivating a democratic culture of active citizens that no longer needs the paternalistic (and often dysfunctional) role of the state. Simultaneously, individual-collective empowerment can also be accomplished. Digital technologies and digital networks allow a variety of individuals and social groups – often excluded by the mainstream public sphere or by the structures and opportunities of mainstream society (still dominated by white, bourgeois, and masculine power) – to develop their own voices, agendas, and discourses, and thus challenge established discourses, interests, and identities (Couldry 2010).

Finally, the issue of creativity is often highlighted because digital tools can empower the productive capacities of groups and individuals to develop alternative economic models and lifestyles beyond the competitive and consumeristic structure of contemporary societies (Bauwens 2006, 2009; Benkler 2006). Open collaboration across a variety of people democratizes production by blurring the distinctions between producer and consumer, thus developing a culture of sharing and cooperation across disciplines and cultures that is also enjoyable (Freedman 2012: 75). For his part, Bauwens (2009) underlines the development of "gift economy" networks that can progressively replace the capitalist modes of production, distribution, and consumption, due to the crises that the latter encounters. All these features are seen to be crucial elements in overcoming many problematic issues that surround today's social life in an increasingly globalized realm that is more competitive, abstract, and uncertain.

However, critical literature (Fuchs 2009, 2011; Dean 2009; Curran et al. 2011) problematizes such potentials by analyzing the political economy of new media and ICTs, as well as the culture of late capitalism (Bauman 2005; Sennett 2006; Holloway 2011/2010) and its social norms. One therefore needs to stress critical questions concerning digital potentiality (that is, concerning the political economy of those contexts where various informal or lifeworld practices occur through the use of digital tools and networks). In this way, one will be able to problematize not only claims relating to reflexivity, citizenship, and democracy, but also empowerment and inclusion. Otherwise, one might fail to see the broader picture where different practices develop, and one might risk falling into reductionist no-

tions of the modern social life that only confirm mainstream master narratives of progress and optimism.

The critical approach towards new media and ICT uses and culture is connected with the political-economic approach to media today. Structural problems with institutional issues related to policy, ownership, or control are crucial determinants of the potentials of communicational and informational tools (Dahlgren 2005: 149). As Freedman (2012: 83) argues, it is important to emphasize the existence of both a commoditized and a non-commoditized form of the Internet. However, in reality, these are difficult to separate; the different forms are configured according to the discourses and uses of people. Research has shown that parallel activities occur in informal media practices that are related to civic and political issues, and simultaneously to market-orientated practices concerning failures of supply and demand mechanisms (Kiriya 2012: 446). Furthermore, "users," amateur content producers, or participants of new media/ICT cultures are not a homogenous whole, but a socially diverse and fragmented group of people whose beliefs, interests, and social relations define the content of uses (van Dijck 2009: 55).

Web 2.0, in particular, provides limitless opportunities "for the renewal and intensification of private enterprise" (Freedman 2012: 77). Fuchs (2011: 3) argues that Web 2.0 tools (like Google) are monopolistic industries advancing private interests under a public facet, reproducing consumerist ideology, monitoring users' activities without being transparent, capitalizing these activities as wel as the data stored from them, censoring users, and advancing the political and cultural dominance of "the West." An important aspect behind the critique of new media/ICT cultures concerns their exploitative character. Web 2.0 user practices are exploited by those private companies who own the Web 2.0 platforms and services (which are widely used across the globe) by commodifying the attention time of users (Fuchs 2011: 7). This is achieved by capturing the creative practices of users to produce new consumer desires – participation is also connected to the expansion of the "experience economy" (van Dijck 2009: 46) – or to optimize the production potential existing in the informal space of leisure activities, and thus to minimize labor costs through informal labor. Andrejevic (2002: 233) argues that surveillance is connected to processes of scientific management, where the monitoring of worker as well as user (or, consumer) practices serves to standardize digital production and to create new markets.

Jakobsson and Stiernstedt (2010) deploy Harvey's (2010) conceptualization of "accumulation through dispossession" to describe the ways that capitalist industries enclose the Internet infrastructure and Web 2.0 platforms. Their aim is to exploit for productive purposes the intimate habits, human characteristics, and private interests of users. Web 2.0 businesses operate on the principles of venture capitalism (Fuchs 2011: 2). Online user activity is seen by policy makers and business think tanks as a source of activity where new business models and new

forms of value production can arise (Freedman 2012: 73); this is particularly due to the potentials of creativity and innovation for economic growth. Openness is lately understood as necessary for a competitive economy (Jakobsson & Stiernstedt 2012: 52). Recent media policy developments recognize the growth of free and communal activity in digital networks and the economic potential. Policy therefore strives to fuse user activity to the market, and to exploit it through new business models (Jakobsson & Stierstedt 2012: 53). Openness in use is therefore encouraged within a proprietary framework (Freedman 2012: 92).

Finally, new media/ICT cultures often appear regressive and non-democratic due to the advance of non-democratic ideologies in Western societies. Some scholars (Mouffe 2004/2000; Bauman 2005; Agamben et al. 2009) foreground the structural inequality of neoliberal capitalism. Economic globalization and the rise of expert forms of governance weaken the likelihood of citizens producing meaningful social change. The rise of poverty across the globe disempowers citizens by foregrounding individual solutions rather than collective ones (Curran 2012: 14). Xenophobic, racist, and generally anti-democratic mobilization, which often propagates physical violence, also advances through the use of new media/ICT tools (Curran 2012: 10).

The Informal: Cultural and Structural Issues of Informality

The term "informal" describes practices and ICT/media uses that may fall outside the norms, laws/codes, and (generally) standards that organize how digital technologies and networks are to be managed. Everyday life is a locus of freedom and self-determination, where social identities and communal bonds – as well as tactics and strategies – develop in response to societal power inequalities and structural determination (DeCerteau 1990). Media literature highlights the communicative and creative capacities that new media structures allow users to develop in informal settings. These connect to the realm of the personal, the everyday, and the unofficial. Informal new media activities stem from the affordance of digital technologies that allow space for creativity and personalization of use, but they are also due to broader socio-cultural variables and contextual issues.

The category of the informal is used to describe different social trajectories that often go beyond the realm of media and technology uses. The media infrastructure is central in the process that sociologists describe as "informalization," related to the globalization of economic activity and the deregulation of state protectionist policies adhering to the "Fordist" mode of economic organization and social reproduction (Webster 2006). Informalization seems to be a major trend in late modern societies (Harvey 1989; Sassen 1994; Slavnic 2010). It describes the organization of a decentralized and reflexive commodity production and distribution process based on informational networks and marketing knowledge and strategies. Informalization occurs both from above and below (Slavnic 2010). Informaliza-

tion from above concerns state policy changes in economic organization and production paradigms. Informalization from below concerns the tactics and strategies of different "lay" actors in coping, resisting, performing, and expressing themselves within particular social contexts.

Informal economic practices often exist outside the scope of formal institutions that regulate economic activity, such as taxation rules or the production relations. Although informal economic practices do not constitute markets, they are regularly interconnected with market functions and often operate as supplementary to markets. Market competition relies on innovation, which can be boosted by the creative and productive potentials of new media and ICT uses that often occur outside the scope of established socioeconomic norms, rules, and policies. Informal practices can be compatible with free market regulations that favor a non-protectionist agenda on economic activity. Loose economic regulations are noted to advance informal sites of economic practices (Davis 2006; Lobato et al. 2011). Different kinds of antinomies and tensions thus rest behind a democratic realization of the polyvalent forms of potentiality epitomized by new media and ICTs. Such tensions are linked to contextual matters concerning local media, labor, welfare, or other social policy regulations. Informal media/ICT practices and networks are tied to issues of context and related to power relations and social divisions. Like peer production (Bauwens 2009), they appear to cover immaterial needs related to meaning, and social and cultural capital; however, peer and amateur producers are dependent for income and hardware infrastructure on market and industrial structures.

To move to the empirical study of the aforementioned phenomena and to assess their actuality, the concept of the informal is used to address new media/ICT uses that extend beyond the scope of the legal rules and socially accepted norms guiding social practices (Castells & Cardoso 2012: 826; Lobato et al. 2011: 900). Among others, examples of informal media practices concern amateur and DIY content production; peer-to-peer (P2P) file-sharing of informational material; digital activism; and the organization of practices, communities, and subcultural activities through digital networks. New media are sources where ideas proliferate and reciprocal communication patterns develop among individuals and social groups (Carpentier 2011: 94). New media platforms and ICTs are tools where creative practices develop, which enable people to solve a variety of problems and to empower themselves and others through community building, and through the materialization of alternative worlds (Gauntlett 2011: 226). The development of social change is connected to the production of a new culture related to new social subjectivities, social values, and new practices.

Case Study: Creative and Communicative Online Practices in Sweden

This paper is connected to the critical tradition of social research, departing from critical political economy and critical cultural studies perspectives that concern new media culture and contemporary society. The analysis of interview data looks at the concrete social realities that involve respondents' own habitus, material scarcities, global influences, and encounters; it further queries the sociopolitically progressive or regressive character of informal new media uses, and it also looks at issues of the exploitation of such uses by media corporations. In this way, the analysis wishes to unfold the potentials of new media/ICT uses, their limits, and the concrete issues of potential actualization.

Sweden is an interesting case study due to various civic developments that occurred there that involved popular uses of new media/ICTs. Sweden has one of the highest rates of Internet penetration (Servaes 2002: 440), with 92.7% of the population connected to the Internet (http://www.internetworldstats.com/europa.htm#se accessed June, 12, 2014). At the same time, Sweden, along other Scandinavian countries, has one of the most developed sectors in ICT production and innovation. As Hilson (2012/2008) notes, the development of high communication and information technologies and ICT expertise was a decisive factor in the economic recovery and economic growth of Scandinavian countries, moving them away from the deep economic crisis that struck Sweden during the late 1980s and the early 1990s. Alongside the development of an economically and technologically strong IT (information technology) sector, Sweden also saw the rise of various civic initiatives that explored, socialized, and politicized ICT uses and structures in ways that often contradicted IT policies and the economic objectives of IT industries. Swedish citizens were pioneers in materializing the potential of the Internet to advance free information exchange from a post-capitalist perspective; Swedish civic organizations were also quick to successfully politicize the right to freedom-of-information exchange. This was in opposition to the segregation of information produced through intellectual property rights regimes internationally, as well as to the circumvention of civic rights and personal privacy that the Internet had made possible through the surveillance and control that it had allowed to third parties.

A critical study of the Swedish new media culture, also underlines the conservative and neoliberal changes that have been occurring in Sweden (and in other Nordic countries such as Denmark and Finland) since the 1990s. This applies particularly to recent decades with the EU's structural adjustment agendas in coordinating with "free market" (sic) imperatives. Such forms of institutional and social restructuring, together with the withdrawal of welfare and the emphasis on competition, and along with the cultivation of economistic social morals (where individuals are expected to assume responsibility for all aspects of their life, to func-

tion as self-entrepreneurs, and to apotheosize private property), broadly connect to the phenomenon of informalization. However, the development of informal, life-world tactics – aside from their defensive role in a neoliberal Hobbesian society – may also operate proactively and subversively against the rules of a "free market."

Media scholars (Dahlgren 2009; Miegel & Olsson 2008, 2012; Lindgren & Linde 2011; Andersson 2012) working in the Swedish new media/ICT context focus on the civic affordances that new media practices carry. The "pirate element" is something that has been stressed by the aforementioned scholars. It refers to theories on new social movements and emerging forms of politicization as potentially subversive, and which might reflect broader tendencies that relate to the eclipse of mass political mobilizations, or to the difficulty in producing social change through conventional means of liberal democratic politics. The generational experience (Dahlgren 2009: 200) of young Swedes shows that pirate practices, such as file sharing, are part of the everyday online activities that people engage in; in that sense, they do not consider it illegal (Andersson 2012: 585). Andersson (2009: 65) argues that illicit file sharing is the norm rather than the exception of digitally-mediated consumption. Research (Miegel & Olsson 2012) showed that generational issues are connected to the destabilization of established rules and norms, and also to the foregrounding of issues that young people consider important. Generational issues, as well as participatory trends that develop in online environments, can produce civic cultures (Dahlgren 2009). These can potentially relate to broader political issues in given spatiotemporal moments. The popularity of "pirate practices" has also been argued to be a form of informal resistance practice, or what Ulrich Beck describes as "subpolitics" and Backardjeva as "subactivism" (Lindgren & Linde 2011). Pirate acts can be viewed as informal political acts because they are grounded on existing social conflicts, such as the one that concerns freedom of information versus copyright enclosures.

One needs further to problematize the possibility of developments related to informal new media uses and practices to produce social change. One also needs to discuss their limitations while understanding that structures and systems require more than changes on individual or informal levels. As Jodi Dean (2009: 23) argues, "Expanded and intensified communicativity neither enhances opportunities for linking together political struggles, nor enlivens radical democratic practices." In addition, one needs to consider the importance of particular events that can radicalize grassroots, informal changes, and alternatives to the mainstream towards political changes and struggles. The current economic crisis event – as the Southern European context now shows – can be one of those events allowing the emergence of new political demands and social struggles.

Semi-structured private interviews and a small focus group interview session were conducted with twelve people from different cities of South Sweden from March to May 2012. Respondents were contacted through snowballing (Bryman 2010: 184). The group of respondents comprised people involved in Internet poli-

tics (such as the Pirate Party and other grassroots initiatives), as well as people involved in various creative practices such as music making and writing, where the Internet and ICT tools and structures are crucial to what they do. The respondents were asked about issues related to their creative practices, and also about their communicative experiences through new media tools/structures. Respondents were asked how they used digital communication devices and networks. The emphasis was on amateur practices of artistic production, file sharing, P2P production, and informational and knowledge exchange; there was a particular focus on counter-informational possibilities. The issues reflexively organized the questions, which concerned the respondents' views on copyright, amateur content production, privacy, and politics. Interviews were conducted through face-to-face meetings and by telephone (including Skype) sessions. Each interview lasted approximately one hour. Pseudonyms were used in the respondents' citations deployed in the analysis. The respondents ranged from "regular" new media/ICT users, to amateur producers of content, as well as people involved in the Internet and information-related politics.

Analysis: The Civic Circuit Model

The analysis uses Dahlgren's (2009: 102) civic circuit model reflexively, in order to approach the researched object from a civic/political perspective. Although the phenomena studied are not explicitly political, the emphasis on political economy and social change involves a political or civic understanding of social phenomena. Furthermore, a civic (or political in broad terms) approach to the contextual realities of informal digital practices allows us to assess the different ideas and aspirations (positivist and critical), and to theorize as to what digital tools and networks mean for society, individuals, and the future. Developed by Dahlgren (2005: 157), the civic circuit model is primarily concerned with the development of forms of democratic cultures in emerging, informal public spheres in contemporary mediascapes. The civic element is concerned with inexplicit political moments in everyday life, which are connected to the quality and specific processes that underline a given political culture. The possibility of civic discussion is Dahlgren's main interest since politics emerges through talking. The research also brings Dahlgren's model into the analysis of practices, taking into consideration the "material" and practical aspects of culture – such as creativity and scarcity – and following the work of scholars (Sennett 2008; Holloway 2010) with broader political interests (in a similar line to Dahlgren's own focus on the deepening of democracy). In that sense, the civic circuit model is analytically deployed to discuss aspects of social practices that concern not only communication, but broader everyday-life cultures related to creativity and to individual and collective habits, tactics, and strategies (Mylonas 2012a: 716). The categories of the civic circuit model are *values, knowledge, trust, practice, space, and identity*. The research aims to

evaluate the respondents' accounts according to critical perspectives that stress the shortcomings of liberal democracy, consumer society, and global capitalism in specific localities.

Values

According to Dahlgren (2009: 112), the category of "values" refers to ideas that organize practices and social relations; values that underline what people do, and that arise through the ways people comment on their practices or their interests.

Most respondents spoke about their communicative or collaborative practices in broad equalitarian, liberal, and libertarian terms. Those involved in political media projects expressed explicitly political views, ranging from anti-capitalist to "realist," including undemocratic positions.

> It does not make sense to speak of ideology. I don't get into left/right divisions. We are working with issues (copyright policies). I am a pragmatist and I want things to happen in society, things we can work together with. (Britta).

Such a "realist" position proposes a technocratic approach to politics, as in "making things work" (Crouch 2011: 17). Critical questions concerning power, structure, and agency are thus surpassed, and things are evaluated according to their utility or "usefulness" (Diken 2011: 154). Several respondents, who either claimed to be uninterested in politics or had affiliated themselves to the Pirate Party of Sweden, expressed similar ideas.

Respondents also commented on the commercial character of the Internet:

> The main problem for me is that every time I use them [Web 2.0 platforms], I support them. I give them money – I mean capital – by using what they are doing because their business depends on me using them. I don't feel controlled by that, I don't feel I need to stop using the tools, I think it is perfectly fine to use them but I wish I didn't. (Johan).

Some respondents theorized the objectification of the Internet user by Web 2.0 structures and his/her instrumental use for commercial purposes (Fuchs 2011: 8). Other respondents referred to the work of critical media projects, such as websites related to the work of the former Pirat Byrån in Sweden on the critical analysis of the corporate Internet. This was in regard to the emergence of "free labor" through users' bandwidth consumption (Terranova 2000: 50); the construction of "big data" sources by surveillance systems monitoring and storing people's online activities; and the development of algorithms that organize people's net usage by prompting them to possible commercial paths in productive ways (creative marketing strategies) for corporation purposes (Andrejevic 2013: 100).

Activists present more explicit and somewhat "courageous" views on the liberating potential of new media/ICT. Technology can contribute to social change through the development of communicative and redistributive networks to counter processes of commodification and control (Mumford 2005/1967):

> Everything is political because everything involves power. In a society where we have these cool machines capable of breaking loose from the circle of commodification – which increasingly governs so much of society, material, social relations, and our very selves – it allows people normally not in power to create commons of free exchange . . . It shifts the balance of power not only because we can use whatever to download the latest album by whoever, but because we can relate to each other in new ways. And also how we can bypass control over who is allowed to develop skills in information technology. (Fredrik).

Regressive values are also expressed through a broader resentment of global politics and the growing of surveillance capacities by governments:

> The industry is also part of the broader big brother society bureaucracy. They want to break the common man, they want to enslave the common man, but they are a bit late. They should have done this twenty years ago because now the Internet has awoken. You and I, my friend, have more knowledge taken in the past two years than what humankind learned in a hundred years . . . The establishment does not like that. They originally made the Internet to track us . . . They are using technology against us, but at the same time we are using technology to benefit mankind. We are living in very interesting times where there is a race happening between the evil ones that want to use technology against mankind and mankind that wants to use technology to advance freedom and knowledge. (Peter).

A "control society" dystopia is stressed. It is concerned with the radical potential of the Internet and ICTs to produce individual and social "awakenings" against the alienating effects of dominant structures of political power. A view of global totalitarianism is expressed through eschatological narratives and conspiracy rationales, stressing discontent with globalization under nationalist and cultural identity configurations. Tanguieff (2010/2005) argues that by bringing everything to light, the "information society" produces more darkness. It creates a greater form of the unknown, giving the impression that reality is completely different to what it appears, and that the truth lies somewhere else. Furthermore, many forgers take advantage of that in line with the deceit strategies of the market society. An anti-enlightenment logic advances that aims to dig deep behind the plains of contemporary secular societies. Dean (2009: 149) concludes that in such contexts, "democracy remains caught in a pseudo-activity reducing politics to a single operation-revelation."

Knowledge

The category of "knowledge" concerns the level, content, and quality of knowledge citizens have on sociopolitical issues (Dahlgren 2009: 145). This category is analytically used to observe the knowledge respondents have on those issues that this study is concerned with, particularly the most critical aspects on digital culture regarding surveillance and exploitation. The aim is to identify the ways in which online critical knowledge is approached by different users. Furthermore, I am also interested to find out what kinds of tacit knowledge people can accumulate through their practical engagements with digital systems and net-

works. Everyday life processes are connected to tacit forms of knowledge (DeCerteau 2008/1990) deriving from experience.

As respondents noted, being creative fulfills existential needs and develops the potential of individual autonomy (Dean 2003: 34). Simultaneously though, boredom and dullness also (re) emerge, possibly as symptoms of the unfulfilled potential of modernity (Debord, 1984/1967). Behind the technological hype, the seperations and divisions of bourgeois society and lifestyle, advance disempowerment and cynicism. The abscense of political utopias for a different society and life, foreground nostalgic ideas of a (supposedly) harmonious past:

> People dare to do things, nowadays, because they have the equipment. People are happier if they are creative and if they are allowed to be creative. But there are negative things too. All these tools also makes us lazy. We are stuck in front of our computers without actually doing things, or speaking to people in person. You can hide behind computers. There is no looking forward, and looking forward is good for appreciation. We don't appreciate anything. We get more creativity but we don't stop; a lot of people get stressed by trying to be part of the hype. (Carolina).

Scholars (Dahlgren 2009: 121) note the empowering nature of the Internet. The Internet is a source for narratives and information that can challenge hegemonic discourses and advance the development of autonomous subjectivity. Nevertheless, the question of how do citizens respond when faced with disruptive contexts (Dahlgren 2009: 79) is much more complex. The regressive aspect of empowerment is apparent in many new media uses (Dean 2009: 23):

> . . . Doctors are important but we don't have to trust just what they say, we can look online, share experiences . . . A hundred people on this site say take this mineral or herb, don't take the vaccines, don't take that medicine, the doctor says, because it is dangerous. The establishment had power over a thousand years saying don't trust other people, we are the ones who have the expertise, you are stupid people, we are the professionals . . . suddenly there is a democratization of not only knowledge but also status. It is not just because you have a college degree that you are better than I, it is not because you have money that you are better than I. The Internet puts us all on the same level . . . (Peter).

The "democratization" of knowledge and truth, though, often results in their relativization being based on ideological and aesthetic points of view (Dean 2009: 155). Challenging expertise may create problems related to the ideologies exposing "facts speaking on their own" (Dean 2009: 150) because "facts" and the gesture of exposure are usually mediated by intensions, ideas, and tactics. Social fragmentation and polarization are important consequences of such forms of "alternative" knowledge distribution networks. Furthermore, civic disempowerment is often the source of a mystification of authority.

Experience of sociopolitical realities foreground a tacit form of knowledge on the limits of media and technology. Users' tacit experiences of systemic power show that the democratic, creative, and emancipatory potentials of media and technology are somehow deferred and often blocked. A political analysis of the experience of systemic power expresses civic disillusionment. In that sense, Dean

(2009: 32) argues that the celebratory rhetoric of new media and ICT often masks the defeat of left politics:

> It seems like a dream that never really happens: people will organize and say what they want and do what they want . . . It is something that everyone is waiting to happen. I guess the Pirate Bay is the biggest activist thing in a way, but where does it lead in the end other than them getting fined and imprisoned? (Johan).

Trust

"Trust" is an analytical category used to discuss the kind of relations existing between the citizens of a given society and the relations of citizens to political authority (Dahlgren 2009: 112). In our context, trust concerns the social ties developing in mediated activities and collective practices utilizing information and communication technologies. Trust develops primarily through intimate relations that are defined by common activities, niche interests, and social beliefs.

Most respondents expressed trust in the Swedish state. Simultaneously, various degrees of discontent with political authority were also evident. Examples drawn from local and global experiences of political mobilizations, such as those related to the "Arab Spring," were given by many respondents, underlining the potential of new media networks for critical information and political action against oppressive regimes. To that extent, the power of new media is crucial for the development of transnational bonds and struggles:

> We have had the Arab Spring, there were several Swedish people helping setting up Tor networks. Tor is a way of concealing who is typing and from where, and this is very important in a dictatorship or in a government that tries to control people. And anonymity is a right, a human right, I think . . . (Jonas).

Dialogical politics, acknowledging difference, do not necessarily advance through transnational connectivity (Fenton 2012: 166). Varying degrees of stereotyping may permeate into the development of mediated forms of support for the causes of others. Simultaneously, a deepening of differences, polarization, cynicism, and enmity also arises in Internet culture. Dean (2009: 147) argues that "dissensus" is what characterizes contemporary political culture, and that this is related to distrust, fundamentalism, and competition between opposed opinions. The specter of totalitarian control haunts the Internet and exposes preferred readings of events and ideological affiliations:

> Let me tell you about the Arab Spring. The Internet itself – regardless of program, Facebook, Twitter, email, fax machines in the Soviet Union, pamphlets in the American revolution . . . is getting information out about what is happening, how are we doing in the revolution . . . With that being said, I do not think that the Arab Spring is truly what people think it is. A lot of the people behind the Arab Spring are in bed with oil barons, Western powers, the globalists . . . They steer up student groups to get independence – that is another discussion . . . The Arab spring is not angelic. There are a lot of people behind the scenes happy to see this happening in the global game. I am not saying they were good dictators . . . When the dictators are helping, keep them. When they are getting too much, kill them, and make it look like a revolution. I am not saying that everyone behind the Arab Spring is necessarily bad.

> There are lots of so-called "useful idiots" on-the-ground students who want freedom and hate these dictators. They are useful pawns. Do you know that Egypt has become less free since Mubarak? (Peter).

Cultural and racial prejudices towards Arabs surface in the excerpt above, and blend with knowledge of geopolitical interests and cynical political practices. Such prejudices are based on hegemonic beliefs that non-Westerners are not capable of achieving sovereignty and democracy (Dean 2009: 84). Ideological perspectives organize who has the potential of making a "true" revolution and who does not. What is interesting to note is that in the regressive utterance above, revolution is not discredited in terms of impossibility but in terms of authenticity.

Trust, though, develops reflexively when intimate relations are developed that are based on shared interests and passions in particular things. Amateur artists develop collaborative relations, mainly for fun and adventure. In this respect, Web 2.0 networks allow the extension of activities in unprecedented ways; events abroad can be organized, mediated production of digital content can occur, and transnational communities can be maintained with the reflexive use of new media. Intermediates are bypassed. Support is expressed voluntarily through the shared experience of amateur production, and a growing awareness of possible economic and social obstacles among people sharing similar interests.

> . . . All the people involved in bands and in companies in our music genre – which is so unpopular – know each other . . . I am friends with people in Quebec, in Belgium, and in France. When you need live shows they book them for you. The whole community helps you out to build networks, and it is definitely Facebook where it happens right now. The labels are part of a big community and the guys there are even more dedicated than the bands . . . They lose more money than the bands . . . but they do it anyway because they love the music . . . I don't understand why, if people like your music, why would you try to punish that person? It is insane. We want people to like our music. If you are an artist then the goal is to make as many people discover your music [as possible]. If they don't pay for it they will pay for it because people are not stupid. They know that touring costs money and records cost money; they will eventually pay. (Patrik).

The spirit of amateurism challenges the identity and the status of the professional. Respondents, who worked as professional musicians, were in favor of new media, despite the fact that they opposed downloading and saw that downloading could not fully be restrained. Furthermore, professionals use new media to develop their work, but they also experience the rise of competition in their field due to the very rise of amateurism that is allowed by digital systems. As a result, they have to work more and under greater uncertainty. Further, they also need to be self-entrepreneurs to remain in the business. Consequently, competition and precarity challenge the foundations of trust, as creators often have to instrumentalize social relations developed online.

Practice

Dahlgren (2009: 146) develops the analytical category of "practice", to address what people actually do online and whether this has any civic/democratic value. Informal media practices are polyvalent and reflexive, entailing many levels of performance, sociability and creative expression.

New media and ICTs allow the development of alternative modes of cultural production (David 2010: 146) that do more justice to artists than corporations:

> The artists are never included in the revenues discussion. It is always the guys with the big cigar. As long as they get their money they will be satisfied. The best solution is selling your music directly from Spotify. This is what happened when the Pirate Bay exploded and the music industry crashed. The Indie labels took power because they never depended on sales but on people interested in music and artists . . . We have the platform to do it without them nowadays, as long as the music industries provide the platforms we use them, and if they don't, someone else will create the platform. It is like selling tapes on the street. The difference is that you can reach six billion people or anyone with an Internet connection. (Henrik).

For professionals, informational and communicational tools are utilized to achieve professional production results with minimal costs (Spilker 2012: 786), and to promote their work through online networks and popular Web 2.0 platforms. Producers self-develop new skills, involving mass amounts of nonpaid work. The experience of artists in countries lacking the equalitarian aspects of Swedish social institutions (Mylonas 2012b) demonstrates the intensification of "doing" through the development of entrepreneurial artistic strategies enriched by social media and a free online culture.

Informal practices often relate to what Holloway (2011/2010) describes as the "creative, purposeful doing" of things. As a musician explains:

> I like telling stories and having good lyrics. It is nice to share your music with people. When I feel I should make a living out of it, I get very uncreative. I feel pressured and I don't think it is fun anymore . . . I am losing it, and I don't think I would be very happy feeling that I always have to do new stuff, that I always have to go further, that I always have to develop. (Marja).

Joy, freedom, and inspiration meet their limits when encountering issues of productivity and optimization. Creative doing (Holloway 2011/2010: 154) is defended as a space of autonomy and identity, as well as a resort of privacy and freedom; it becomes a source of resistance by some respondents. Holloway underlines the constant attempt of capital to commodify "doing" because it does not reproduce the capitalist process – it potentially threatens it. Such attempts occur through the pervasive discourses of success and competition in consumerist societies, elevated to the form of social norms and personal values or life goals. Most importantly, though, a particular subjectivity is constructed through the production of material enclosures and scarcities that force today's people to accept the aforementioned (neoliberal) norms as survival strategies.

Research, however, has shown (Mylonas 2012, 2014) that new media users are keen to develop entrepreneurial strategies in relation to their informal activities. This is due to a deficiency in other resources, material scarcities, and a lack of critical knowledge and reflection over the mainstream discursive hype of entrepreneurialism and the individual life choices in consumer society.

A further issue that can be raised here concerns the unconscious or "organic" ways in which market systems create value from Internet users' activities. Although neoliberal values can be negated, either explicitly or tacitly, Web 2.0 structures create value not only from individuals' online activities but their attendances as well. The capacities to monitor and store user online movements allow the building of databases that are sold for marketing practices (among other things). So user data is an important commodity for the "information society." There is no easy way out of this process, as it could imply the opting out of mainstream Internet platforms (such as Facebook) and potentially all Web 2.0 Internet use, or could require special informatics knowledge that is not widely available.

Space

The category of "space" concerns the loci where communication occurs (Dahlgren 2009: 114) and the ways such spaces are organized. Space is a material as well as a symbolic dimension where human activities emerge. The very dimension of space (as well as its use) is determined by the discourses and practices defining it. The category of space is studied in relation to questions of ownership, use, and the organization of new media spaces for communicative, collaborative, and creative activities.

Although digital technologies and networks allow the reflexive production of new spaces of private and public activity, socioeconomic hierarchies and power relations organize the uses and the production of spaces. Enclosures produced by the economies of capital and subsequent informational and social policies (Harvey 2010: 245), as well as polity deficits associated with the minimalist opportunities of civic participation and representation (Carpentier 2011: 69), yield various forms of spatial exclusion that relate to the possibility of staging one's voice publicly, or the possibility of participation in economic and social activities. Informal media practices develop new spaces of activity, where inequalities can be addressed and exclusion can be eradicated.

Respondents spoke about the development of "pirate" politics as something new that allows space for civic involvement and representation for people not represented by the traditional agents of parliamentary democracy (notably, unions and political parties). Issue politics seems to be more reflexive and may temporarily bracket deep ideological divisions; yet, such divisions do not disappear:

> . . . I hope it will open up the way for the weird political parties. The Pirate Party is accused for being a one-issue party, which is very limited, but it is not true. Since the Party got members from the whole political spectrum, from Nazis to the black

> block, from the extreme left and everything in between, it is actually required that
> some focus points are set and then developed. (Tobias).

Interest in sociopolitical issues motivates people to pursue political discussions online. The porous Internet structure permits the exposure of diverse views and opinions. Curiosity is assisted by anonymity; users often explore views opposite to their own. Despite various forms of fragmentation and cacophony, the possibility to encounter the "other" as an active (yet mediated) agent, and not as a representation, is there:

> My blog is for art. But still, most blogs I read are not art blogs but political blogs, and I am debating a bit . . . I go to a person's blog and see their influences. People are more complex than that, but you can get a clue of the influences a person has. I always try to challenge myself by reading things I don't like, but it is often depressing . . . Although I know where I am standing, I still want to try to understand how others think and to get myself stronger in my opinions. I try to understand who a given person is, why he is thinking like that. I am trying to get to the source of things because it is very hard to convince people when you are angry. You have to try to see through what makes people angry or frustrated. If people write stupid, angry, racist things, they are usually very frustrated and I want to learn to debate in a good way against it. (Marja).

The dimension of space is connected to that of practice, because space provides the concrete possibility for alternatives to emerge. In that respect, the emergence of the so-called "network studio" (Spilker 2012: 775), enables remote cooperation and allows possibilities for amateur artistic production. The network studio works both inside and outside of the dominant economic mode of production. Altruistic co-operation for social and cultural capital flourishes in such spaces:

> . . . He recorded the drums in a studio there, then he sent us the drum tracks and we did the guitars and bass at my place at the computer . . . You need a clean signal to play with the sound until you get good results. We knew someone in Gothenburg who has a studio and we recorded the lyrics there, and an old friend from school told us that we can also do the first takes for free. That was all we needed because we recorded only four songs. It is not finished yet but we are mixing it ourselves. (Patrik).

Informal practices occur in fragmented spaces alongside formal spaces of activity, like paid labor. Several respondents were able to maintain the boundaries of these spheres without the informal falling into the formal. The general high living standards of Sweden, and the country's liberal constitution, allow considerable choices for Swedish citizens compared to those of citizens elsewhere (Mylonas 2014). Simultaneously, the transformation of the Scandinavian social model towards neoliberal ends (Crouch 2011: 23) prioritizes labor flexibility, whose effects are not yet as dramatic as in other parts of the world (Davis 2006). This is due to the "leading" position of Northern European countries in their "level of integration, competitive potential, and share of benefits from economic growth" (Castells 2010/1996: 134) in the networked global economy:

> Would you like to be able to make a living out of your creative work? I don't know to be honest. I did for about two years, but it was a lot of work and in the end it was

not worth the money, so I had to get out of it. On the other hand, if people would give me money I'd take it and be happy. But to be realistic, it is not a driving force at the moment. (Johan).

Widespread concerns with privacy and the sociopolitical control of people through the Internet primarily involves dimensions of space. Freedom emerges as an ideal that can trigger limitless forms of resistance, which can then lead to the passive destruction of illiberal spaces. Awareness of rights infringement is central in the triggering of forms of resistance:

> People's creativity when it comes to control issues is amazing. If you try to control the Internet by infringing people's rights, control always leads to some kind of rebellion. In the worst case scenario, the Internet collapses and nobody wants to use it anymore. Or they use it and they do these illegal downloading things in other ways. (Henrik).

Concerns on spatial and temporal changes of place are also raised (Bauman 2005: 71). The excerpt below foregrounds concerns over privacy and corporate data mining. An important thing to further stress is the absence of an adequate critique over the commodification of the Internet itself, along with other aspects of the lifeworld:

> The problem is that foreign companies can have more access to our data than our police . . . Companies have economic interests, and if they have money they can do a lot of things and hurt people . . . Swedish laws should be of highest importance, not American laws, under which most Internet companies are subjected to . . . I don't believe that we have a corrupt government but someone can see what I do online. Since I don't do anything illegal I am not paranoid. I am concerned for future uses of my data. (Carolina).

Identity

The subjective experience of private and public issues often provides a point of departure for people's engagement with sociopolitical issues. Dahlgren (2009: 57) notes that personal identification to civic ideas is a crucial denominator of democracy. Analytically, the category of identity studies the civic relevance of the discourses expressed.

People with explicit political views express the importance of alternative information, lifeworld experiences, and social relations in the political use of ICTs and new media. Biographical references demonstrate the importance of informal context in the development of political subjectivities:

> . . . When I grew up, my father worked as a computer technician, and my brother was involved in the BBS/phreaking scene and had computers at home at an early age. I read a book called *Copyright Doesn't Exist* in the late 90s. That was probably the first time I connected Warez and the like to political activism. I was involved in the syndicalist youth federation (SUF) at the time, and met other syndicalists and anarchists who had a view of software as a kind of "commons". (Fredrik).

A reciprocal relation lies between practices and civic/political identities:

> Some of the things the Pirate Party has stood for I like very much, but I don't like the whole hippy-socialist aspect. It is always these guys playing with the knit sweaters, "peace man, let's go to get high, let's go to make pot legal rally." I am not into that whole aspect, but I can relate to some of the things they stand for . . . (Peter).

Political ideas organize the perspective under which social realities are viewed by subjects. Theory, ideas, and knowledge rationalize the experience of real-life contradictions in structural terms, produce identifications, and arrange the content of practices:

> . . . When we copy, we don't do this "on the Internet," the cloud is somewhere else. . . Usually, we sit in the same boat – underpaid, unrepresented by politicians. The $100 million soccer arenas aren't built to serve our cultural interests, they are built to provide a "new skyline" for creating "clusters of growth" for a "creative economy" we are no part of anyway . . . But I grew up on not only the demo-scene, but the DIY punk scene as well . . . DIY labels never made any profits but put out so much great music anyway. Not everyone experienced that, but sometimes I imagine a world in which all these changes actually created preconditions that made it impossible for new cultural material to be financed . . . I can sympathize with people who are afraid their profession is threatened by technological and political changes, but I never really understood the idea that making a living from it should be an eternal right either. (Fredrik).

A universal class identity is underlined above, through a critique of social and individual fantasies generated by late capitalism. As Harvey (2008: 64) argues, neoliberalism has failed in its aspirations to create sustained economic growth, while the socioeconomic system expands in ways that exclude vast numbers of populations and make a variety of skills and professions redundant (Holloway 2011/2010). Co-operative practices are thus often connected to anti-consumerist ideas.

Niche identities find expression through culture and media, but they relate to important experiences and events in people's lives. Identity is affirmed and reproduced through the communities developing online. Digital tools and networks therefore function as tools challenging diverse forms of exclusion, and providing the opportunity for participation in social struggles (Holloway 2011/2010):

> . . . We are basically lucky that the geek industry has been marginalized and had a tough time growing up, and that gives the text a unique perspective on bullying 'cause that is what some governments are doing right now. So we managed to get a lot of money and influence, and hopefully we can sway some people. Well, it is a battle between the money and political interests. (Jonas).

Subcultural affiliations are also central in the developing of practices and spaces, which rely on attitudes and ideas and on specific procedural values (Dahlgren 2009: 111) shaping social relations. The impossibility of the full inclusion of "anyone" arises, as spaces of alternative activities are often produced in order to secure particular practices and identities from the (often competing) ways and logics of others:

> It depends a lot between genres and scenes. Punk rock – or our genre, skate punk – is supportive, so in our community everyone is in a band or in a label. But there is no

fan base except for the people that work in the scene. If you look at hip-hop or more popular genres, I think people don't care as much, because fans just listen to music without being in bands, because you need to know what it takes to make it, that is the reason why big bands and big labels are afraid of downloading, because you might end up not having the ignorant, narcissist fans that just don't care and music is just entertainment for them. (Patrik).

Conclusions

This article presented the data and data analysis of one part of a broader qualitative research, looking at informal ICT/new media practices in different European countries. The research was theoretically orientated, aiming to foreground a variety of aspects concerning the concrete uses of digital technologies and networks, and to engage a variety of critical approaches that deal with many issues regarding digital culture (such as exploitation, alienation, ideology, and craftsmanship). Departing from a broad understanding of ICTs and Internet uses, the respondents' identities also vary, and do not form a concrete sample of a population sharing specific characteristics. Instead, respondents are loosely connected by their nationality and by the reflexive use of the term "informal."

The analysis of respondents' accounts points towards a variety of often conflicting themes. New media/ICT affordances allow reflexive possibilities for the development of a variety of attitudes and practices with civic and political aspects and potentials. The practices studied occurred within precarious and complex sociopolitical and economic contexts that affect all countries, irrespective of their particularities. Discontent, frustration, disempowerment, and disillusionment towards sociopolitical affairs were expressed by nearly all respondents, while reflecting on their intimate practices and ICT and media uses. In Sweden, considerable material pressure is evident. This relates to the restriction of individual freedoms and popular sovereignty, and is connected to the global processes of economic enclosure – even though the socioeconomic situation is considerably different to that of other European and non-European countries.

Civic-political attitudes unfold through biographical references and contexts of a subjective nature. Various forms of democratic views, both moderate and radical, were often expressed. Regressive views were also apparent, targeting the scapegoats of the negative globalization (Bauman 2000: 92). Sociopolitical fragmentation is an important aspect of new media practices. Ideas develop in online spaces, but broader subjective contexts shape individual perspectives. Theory is essential in organizing coherent and critical views in understanding the complexity of the world today. One should use relevant theory to approach media practices along with social realities outside the scope of the media (Dean 2009: 64). Critical political economy, in that respect, is useful in understanding the stakes concerning informality and amateurism. New modes of production and distribution of content also relate to new modes of consumption. The tacit form of knowledge produced

in reflexive spaces of relative freedom may conditionally develop active forms of consciousness, where people play, explore, and challenge different things and possibilities. Nevertheless, the potential of play and tacit knowledge is what late capitalist industry aims to enclose and regulate for productive ends. In such potential – which is fragmented by locality, class, and other issues – lies the possibility of a post-capitalist democracy. New forms of political praxis and political thinking, though, will open the way towards a course for such possibility to emerge.

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