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# Urban Hacking and Its “Media Origins”

Angela Krewani

## Abstract

*This essay traces the genealogy of urban and mobile media hacking. It is argued that the forerunners of urban hacking were artists active within the Fluxus scene and Viennes Actionism. Their artistic practices can be seen as precursors for more recent interventions in public and particular urban spaces which have been described as “urban hacking.” These developments appear genealogically and are also related to a turn towards individual media production: the introduction of the Portapak video camera brought about grassroots media activism and influenced the institutionalisation of public television.*

## Introduction

Most commonly, the term “hacking” refers to individuals’ interaction with the computer and is often associated with forms of digital activism. This may concern issues such as open source software, cybercrime or creative commons, just to name a few (Jordan 2008). The idea of “the hacker” also relates to anti-establishment behaviour and a subversion of communication technologies, starting from the telephone and its infrastructures (Gröndahl 2000). In the course of various discussions on hacking, the term has been related to the idea of subverting the social, especially with regard to the conception and construction of urban social spaces: such “urban hacking” has become a name for a variety of activities taking place in urban spaces which go beyond what is common and (in some cases) legal. Melanie Gadringer defines it as “the destruction of the urban and the rupture of the environment as well as its rules and systems” (Gadringer 2010: 35). Urban hacking thus figures as a practical and theoretical critique of public spaces, whereby the city is understood as a semiotic space (Schneider/Friesinger 2013). In this context urban hackers enter tunnels, climb high-rises or build public gardens on old train tracks. The idea is to reappropriate the city to individual needs.

This subculture – moving beyond the technological origins of the term – understands hacking as a subversive intervention in urban spaces (Garrett 2013). Garrett lists a variety of hacking practices within the city which focus on infil-

trating the city and exposing its ruins and lost cultures. Urban hacking therefore marks the transition from hacking as a technological activity to real-life action. In some cases, actors involved in these practices also go beyond infiltration but change and sometimes repurpose a space.

Drawing on a genealogical approach to media history (Elsaesser 2002), we can discover a long tradition of the conflation of media practices with urban, spatial actions. All these activities combine a critical perspective on media or communication structures within urban spaces. Therefore, I want to argue for a media genealogy of artistic urban intervention as precursor of urban hacking. Furthermore, I want to argue that media interventions into public spaces display a long, democratic genealogy and are closely linked to the democratic use of spaces and media. These media interventions justify the understanding of urban hacking as a combined spatial and mediated practice, which nowadays particularly revolves around locative media.

One of the first voices of a democratic use of mass media is Berthold Brecht's *Radio Theory*: a collection of essays published between 1927 and 1932 demanding democratic participation and collective ownership of mass media. Since radio is a two-way technology, which can receive and broadcast messages, it can be transformed into an interactive communication tool (Brecht 1967). Brecht demands a democratic interactive communication between the producers of content and the listeners, who should be enabled to produce and broadcast individual messages. In addition he challenges the idea of private media ownership and control. By connecting media ownership and media participation, Brecht paved the way for a critical media theory of democratic participation. Media ownership, communication structures and participation befitted debatable terms and the foundation for individual media use.

The demand for an individual use of media and their communication structure has also been transferred to the concept of the city. The modern, urban city is conceived of as semiotic structure, which fosters an understanding of urban structures as communication structures. Michel DeCerteau also understood urban life as semiotic practice. His famous book on *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1984) provides a conceptual basis for urban media projects. Through his semiotic approach, media actions and urban practices can be understood as linked activities. Similarly, Bradley L. Garrett's place-hacking activities in the city are based on an interventionist and semiotic understanding of urban structures. Thus Garrett's activities consist of exploring hidden places such as ruins, tunnels and roofs. In doing so, the author engages in re-writing the history of urban spaces (Garrett 2013). Such urban hacking has been understood as a strategy for urban planning and redesigning the city (Gadringer 2010). By way of interfering with architectures and infrastructures, urban hackers develop an understanding of a critical guerrilla (Schneider/Friesinger 2013: 89).

Discourses on urban hacking underline concepts such as revolutionary behaviour and guerrilla and also include aesthetic forms of activism. In the following,

I want to argue that urban (media) hacking possesses a tradition of public artistic actions and democratic use of media – long before the inception of digital communication structures.

## Forerunners of urban hacking

Artistic interventions into public spaces and the conceptual expansion of the artwork were strongly voiced in the emerging *happening* and *Fluxus* culture of the late 1960s. The term “Fluxus” refers to an experimental, international movement of artists, designers and more generally “creatives” involved in, for example, concept art and media art. Closely linked to the concepts of *Fluxus* operates VALIE EXPORT’s project *Tast und Tapp Kino* (1968). In this project, the artist combines street with a critique of the cinematic situation: by applying a box in front of her breasts which symbolises the cinematic space and the cinematic screen. Walking the streets in this attire, she asks passers-by to touch her naked breasts within the box. She thus points to the cinematic desire for the female body. EXPORT herself locates her project within the tradition of Viennese Actionism “which anticipated Body Art and certain forms of Performance Art. [...] Using the body in actions corresponds to using these other materials [...]. In any case, a specific awareness of the material characterizes Actionism, the drama of material acting for and against itself.” (EXPORT 1989: 69 ff.)

Interestingly enough EXPORT combines urban activism with a critique of the cinematic viewing situation, thus conflating the reflection of media with urban interventionism. At least from then on, media strategies could have been reformulated as situationist or guerrilla practices. This connection was intensively practised with the emerging video culture and video groups of the 1960s and 1970s. Especially the North American video context brought about changes in media practices. The portable video camera *Portapak* enabled the mobile documentation of social and urban situation. It rekindled the perception of television, because of its mobility and post-production possibilities. Until the introduction of the *Arriflex* portable 16 mm camera with a connected sound system in 1960 and its use by the “direct-cinema” film-makers, journalistic work on documentary film was more or less non-existent (Krewani 2014).

In this context of ongoing mobilisation and democratisation of media production, television was no longer understood as commercial activity but as democratic institution serving the interests of local communities (Stein 2001). Several alternative, radical television projects were founded. One of the first to come into being was the New York initiative *RainDance Corporation*. Established in 1969 as a radical media activist group, it was planned as a source of ideas with the intent of fusing media technology with social criticism. The name refers to the think tank *RandCorporation*, famous at the time for advising the government and the industry.

Referring to Marshall McLuhan's ideas on cybernation and television, *Rain-Dance Corporation* developed a critical position towards established media – foremost towards network television – and it started to discuss media structures and general issues of media organization. In 1971, Michael Shamberg published *Guerilla Television*, a guide to alternative television production. His book is a collage of essays, cartoons and television and a manual for television production (1971). Its fascination for urban hacking is a mixture of alternative, “guerrilla” media strategies, the application of media and computer technology and their infusion into urban spaces. Especially computer technology, which was framed in terms of cybernetic processes, provided the basis for media exchange. Thus technological knowledge was transferred into concepts of interactive technologies, long before digital interactivity came into being. *Guerilla Television* conjures up an interactive communication structure, based on television:

It's unlikely there will be a significant, discrete new medium beyond television. Instead, we're going to have symbioses of media. Things like xerox-machines giving a print-out of a televised copy of the daily newspaper; three media in one; or model testing by community groups using computer terminals to cure problems. (All electronic information can be transmitted as the same type of binary pulse. Thus the cable in cable television can supply any type of end-terminal from TV to computers to holographic chamber). (Shamberg 1971: 13, 14)

The Canadian *Satellite Video Exchange Society* and the artist Michael Goldberg articulated a similar approach to media and urban mobilisation in publishing the *Accessible Portapack Manual*. This handbook underlined the mobility and democratic accessibility of the new, comparably cheap communication technology, as Goldberg voices in the manual's introduction (1976).

Because of its relatively low cost, small-format video has spread quickly around the industrialized west. Versatile and easy to learn, the portapack has nurtured the concept of access, of sharing this resource by many people with varied viewpoints and interests. This radically changes the television process, taking the medium out of the hands of professionals and creating a new mirror of society. [...] If we choose to make use of a medium we should learn its techniques, its possibilities and limitations, and treat it with care to gain the best use of it. (Goldberg 1976: 0)

A similar attitude towards media and communication is taken up by the group editing the journal *radical software*, whose six issues were published between June 1970 and summer 1974. Being an ambitious project, the group displayed a similar interest in the mobilisation of urban media. The first issue drew a theoretical line from an article by Frank Gillette on media ecology, by Paul Ryan on the communication possibilities of cable TV, and by Gene Youngblood on what he labels “videosphere.” By and large these issues document a major step towards a theory

of contemporary media as democratic communication tools. Ryan explored the democratic aspects of video activism which consisted of the setting up of a local information structure and video work as democratic media input. Video enabled the public to engage with media communication and distribution. Interestingly enough, he applied a cybernetic metaphor to his model of video: “Just as VTR extends man as a cybernator so cable can enlarge the capacity of the local culture to communicate about and control its development. This control can include some decisions about important information” (Ryan 1970: 1). Concerning the technological aspects of video, Ryan opens up the space between artistic and political uses of video. Whereas “video art” could employ a television set and turn the signal into an artistic picture, politically oriented video came into being with the introduction of the *Portapak*.

These various attempts at formulating alternative media practices are related to Marshall McLuhan’s media theory, underlining the structuring interplay of media with all kinds of human actions. Contrary to an empirical television theory of viewing rates, McLuhan’s theory stresses the structuring and conceptual dimensions of technical media. Thus electronic media in McLuhan’s sense could encompass all kinds of media; his focus lay on their anthropological and ecological qualities. This approach to media as urban and democratic action was taken up by various groups involved in grassroots media activism. Through the connection of subversive media practice and urban activism, it can be understood as an early form of urban hacking. In addition, it highlights the connection between urban and media actions (Krewani 2014).

These different actions and concepts have shaped an understanding of urban media which is transformed and heightened with the advent of digital media, as Eric Kluitenberg argues. In his view, we are living in a space where “the public is reconfigured by a multitude of media and communication networks interwoven into the social and political function of space to form a ‘hybrid space’” (Kluitenberg 2006: 8).

Thus, “hybrid spaces” function as extension and consolidation of urban media spaces. Contrary to the radio or the video camera, mobile digital media offer a direct access to information and networks online within urban spaces. Thus they counter the ahistorical spaces of media flows in favour of discontinuous electronic communication networks (ibid: 10). Like preceding media and communication forms, these “hybrid spaces” also invite for the sabotage of open spaces, as Eric Kluitenberg brings up by offering a list of “subversive” media strategies such as tactical geography, disconnectivity, sabotage, legal provisions and prohibitions, reductions in economic scale, accountability and public transparency and finally the deliberate violation of an imposed spatial programme (ibid: 13 ff.). From this list it can be deduced that since the introduction of the radio, technological communication media provide aspects of reappropriation which could be called hacking.

These double-bind structures of technological and digital media (standard communication and subversive reappropriation) are vividly illustrated in artistic

media applications. The artistic productions of the British collective *Blast Theory* provide a variety of examples of artistic urban hacking. Their project *Uncle Roy All around You* (2003) mixes online and street participants, urban spaces, mobile and virtual worlds and programmed gaming with live performance. Street players pass through the city following clues on their mobile devices in search of the mysterious Uncle Roy, while online players follow their progress on a computer screen, trying to support them with additional information. Players are provided with a PDA (personal digital assistant) device, which locates them in the urban space of inner-city London. Using this device, players receive hints from the staff in the computer room. Finally, they have to find Uncle Roy's address and are guided into a certain room. Here, they are provided with further tips before meeting an actor impersonating Uncle Roy.

With regard to the connection between subversive urban action and hacking, we can observe a confluence on a variety of levels that are as follows:

- The street players' experience combines active action within the urban space and the media input from the PDA – the urban space is thus redefined through the digital companion.
- The players are asked by the staff to contact strangers from the control room.
- Aspects of digital surveillance are made obvious through the control room. Here the online players journey through a 3D model of the game space. They can move their avatar on the screen, which at the same time figures as the players' urban map; in addition they can communicate with a message box. Finally, when a street player enters Uncle Roy's office, online players are invited to join them.

Throughout the production the players have to correlate urban situations with media situations; thus, urban place and media have turned into shifting concepts. Among others this project is just one example of artistic projects interfering in media and urban structures. It clearly illustrates the genealogical connection between a reflection on media and communication structures on the one hand and the conception of urban spaces on the other hand. Urban hacking has become a strategy with mobile media. In its aesthetic versions, it has turned into a valid strategy for the reflection on the ongoing and shifting connections between places and media. It provides an understanding of the constructiveness of places and voices the interdependence between urban spaces and media. As these arguments are a part of a greater research interest, they have to be substantiated further and are to be detailed in future research.

## Conclusion

As it has been argued, urban hacking covers a wide range of practices involving digital media and diverse communities. It is relevant to aesthetic, political and cultural contexts. Within a genealogical approach, urban hacking can be read as a cultural continuation of political and aesthetic projects that perceive media as part of a "political public." This "political public" as a mediated public space has been demanded by the German playwright Berthold Brecht as a democratic space. Although the realisation of an interactive media communication was lacking the technological basis at that time, artistic experiments and political groups expanded the idea on the basis of their media uses practices and successively established the foundation for subversive media uses which we may also call "hacking."

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