

Politics after Networks. Commons, Publics, Collectives 2014

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SPHERES EDITORIAL COLLECTIVE

#1 POLITICS AFTER NETWORKS – COMMONS, PUBLICS, COLLECTIVES

With this first issue dedicated to exploring *Politics after Networks* we launch *spheres: journal for digital cultures*. The journal is run by an editorial collective based at the Centre for Digital Cultures, Leuphana University of Lüneburg, and is supported by an international advisory board. It engages in contemporary, historical and emerging discussions concerning digital cultures and explores the social, cultural and political stakes at play by reassembling key concepts such as public spheres, media spheres and atmospheres. The journal invites exchanges between scholars, policy makers, media artists, activist and hackers, and offers a space where solicited contributions (after a first peer review) are openly reviewed through invited comments.

The very design and setup of *spheres* takes into consideration recent and urgent developments in scholarly publishing precipitated by digital media: through publishing open access (and without any publication fees), and through developing new publication formats and forms of exchange that speak to and foster emerging (counter or recursive) public spheres. *spheres* therefore already positions itself squarely within politics after networks. One prominent way of addressing the matter is: how can we produce new collectivities on the basis of the kinds of connectivity afforded by networked computation? The labour involved in building common infrastructures or even media spheres for scholarly exchange here of course only represents a relatively minor part of what constitutes politics after networks.

The contributions to this issue explore the topic more widely. Beli, on the basis of experiences from India, shows how struggles over the radio and WiFi spectrum concern the commons as infrastructure of the public sphere. His in-depth analysis of regulation policies and possible alternatives to it stresses that the commons should not be seen as endangered entities worthy of protection, but rather must be collectively produced. Rachel O'Dwyer responds that while experiments such as those associated with the meshworks of [Republic Wireless](#) or [Freifunk](#) offer exciting ways of developing shared

infrastructure, their openness is challenged when they serve as corporate overlay and are thereby enclosed.

Jodi Dean intervenes in debates surrounding recent political mobilisations such as Occupy¹ by insisting that these are to be understood as forms of class struggle. Where communicative capitalism subsumes communication and encloses sociality, it is the cognitariat or knowledge class that revolts. ‘Big data’ and the ‘internet of things’ for Dean amount to yet another instance of the enclosure of our life in the form of data. Tyler Hinson responds, drawing on the work of Bifo Berardi and Maurizio Lazzarato, that the desubjection that is a consequence of these developments may positively connote the destruction of specifically capitalist subjectivities and the production of other ones.

Where Dean openly challenges the idea that the internet constitutes a public spheres,² Nyx McLean in her contribution looks at how the Johannesburg Pride developed with digital media. In her view social networking sites enable counter or queer publics and thus denominates an important dynamic which shape the political today, allowing for a space to negotiate LGBTIAQ identities. Politics after networks continue to be concerned with heteronormativity and racism, but social networks establish new conglomerates of the public, media and affect. Marty Huber challenges McLean to also provide an account of how data collection and surveillance may impede these counter or queer publics, and suggests that we should ask how to organize our own spaces.

Rodrigo Nunes provides a broader analysis of ‘collective action after networks’ by posing the question of organization after networks with regards to recent protest movements. Instead of following the old dichotomy between horizontal networks and vertical centralism, he draws on insights from network theory to note how movements are characterised by distributed leadership. He proposes that in order to account for both the stability and dynamics of movements we distinguish between network-system and network-movement. In doing so, as Clemens Apprich elaborates, he effectively challenges both the current ‘spontaneous ideology’ of social movements and systems theory, pushing the latter into new directions.

The contributions to this issue therefore collectively lay out the terrain on which politics after networks takes place today. Politics after

1 See Nicholas Thoburn, “Minor Politics, Occupy, and Territory”, *Mute*, 2(3), 2012; David Graeber and Yuk Hui, “From Occupy Wall Street to Occupy Central: The Case of Hong Kong”, *Los Angeles Review of Books*, October 14, 2014.

2 See Jodi Dean, “Why the Net is Not a Public Sphere”, *Constellations*, 10(1), 2003, pp. 95–112.

networks is partly a matter of using existing social networks towards political ends, but also of challenging their limits and logics by organizing alternatives. It is a matter of social movements organizing with networked computers, but also of challenging the narratives of horizontality by offering a political analysis of network dynamics. It is a matter of a struggle between commons and enclosure, where the subsumption of communication produces class struggle of the cognitariat, and where potentially open and common infrastructures provide concrete attempts at producing alternative media and public spheres. Politics after networks are still embedded into capitalist, heteronormative, racist, patriarchal, and imperial power structures.

spheres invites readers to contribute to the debates around each topic. Book or other reviews, such as the review of Felix Stalder's *Digital Solidarity* by Paula Bialski and Sascha Simons' review of Andreas Treske's *The Inner Life of Video Spheres* in this issue, constitute a further part of the puzzle. Further commenting and more papers on the same topics are constantly invited to foster debates. Contributions by Christopher Kelty speaking against networks, Margarita Tsomou about the 2011 Syntagma Square occupation in Athens and its videographing, and videos by Oliver Lerone Schultz, are forthcoming shortly. Thus, we consider issues to be something like small spheres of discussion by themselves: constantly growing, reaching out to new readers and contributors, enhancing thinking and activism in the respective field. The contributions cater to both the traditional needs for high quality academic papers and the practical as well as tactical orientation of activists. Hence, the content combines text, audio and video in order to build an innovative, useful and easy to access resource fostering a lively debate about social change in emerging network societies.