EDITORIAL COLLECTIVE

#3 UNSTABLE INFRASTRUCTURES

No digital cultures without infrastructures! This issue will look into the theoretical as well as practical explorations of infrastructures as operational backbone of digital cultures. We deem Infrastructures, understood as an ensemble of human, social and technological individuals, important for yielding new forms of knowledge, which are able to challenge and transform the current architecture of infrastructural systems, software protocols, and network media, represented by corporate Internet-platforms like Amazon, Facebook or Google. Even though we have been witnessing an 'explosion' of the discourse around digital cultures and its infrastructures in the last years, most of the research and critique in this field is still based on the model of a predefined network, thereby repeating the epistemological presuppositions of nodes and links, rather than thinking about alternative perspectives for our technocultural future. Beyond commercial media platforms, where the individual remains a clearly identifiable point within the network, in order to address him or her with personalized ads, network technologies contain the potential to foster new forms of subjectivity, where the individual becomes a network itself – from the networked individual to the individual as network.

Rethinking the politics of digital infrastructures necessitates a perspective from the Global South as a crucial instrument with which to break with the Western paradigm that argues that technology is responsible for – positive or negative – social change. Hence, this issue on Unstable Infrastructures investigates the materiality and geography of media in order to pose the following questions: What are the political and social effects visible not only in the aesthetic practices of digital media, but in the *underlying* structures themselves? How do infrastructures shape culture, economics and politics in specific regions and localities? How do we imagine democratic action within contemporary digital media networks? How can infrastructures be tactically appropriated to serve

more progressive and diverse agendas for multiple publics? And how can we create and sustain alternative social infrastructures invested in diversity and lessening inequality?

In order to provoke a change of perspective, the predominant alignment of individuals and collectives supplied by digital infrastructures needs to be challenged. The most urgent question should not longer be, how collectives are formed by links of nodes in a network, but how these individuals in a likewise social and technological way are shaped by the collective and its infrastructure. For the social then, a focus on infrastructure allows us to uncover the ways interaction is influenced through "radically redefined forms of control", specifically "device standards, storage medium, and transmission formats, blurring the boundaries between media, computer, software, and telecom industries".[1] This shift in directions aims at an infrastructural level that undermines the units of both individual and social bodies. It focuses on the "infra" of infrastructures, fully taking into account that this is not – to speak in Marx's terms – the superstructure, nor the basis, but rather a techno-logistic undercurrent. In this sense, infrastructures are historical materialities which intersect, overlap, reinforce, transform and compete against each other. They are unstable, complicated, vulnerable, and amenable to modification through artistic, cultural and political interventions.

Because of their instability infrastructures are hard to grasp – and their lack of visibility provokes doubts and suspicions regarding the infrastructural distribution of knowledge and abilities. As a result we witness a discontent in digital cultures that is preoccupied with the limits of self-determination and missing opportunities of collective negotiation of protocols and infrastructures, and can be considered as an expression of interferences and struggles between the various layers attached by the development and evolution of infrastructures. Hence, these structures in the making do not merely operate on the horizontal dimension of distribution, but also come along with or even are conditioned by processes of concentration, centralisation and accumulation – like it has been analysed for crucial infrastructural projects of the past[2] and present[3]. But although this vertical dimension has been disregarded recently by

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1 David Tilson et al., "Research Commentary. Digital Infrastructures: The Missing IS Research Agenda", *Information Systems Research*, Vol. 21, No. 4, 2010, pp. 748-759, p. 4.

2 Cp. Thomas P. Hughes, *Networks of Power. Electrification in Western Society, 1880-1930*, Baltimore MD/London, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1983.

3 Cp. Mark Andrejevic, "Facebook als neue Produktionsweise", in Oliver Leistert und Theo Röhle (eds.), *Generation Facebook: Über das Leben im Social Net*. Bielefeld, transcript Verlag, 2011, pp. 31-49.

attempts "to render the social world as flat as possible"[4], it should not be forgotten that digital cultures still pose the question of access to infrastructures and to means of their production – as can be seen in recent debates about the commons and shared resources.[5]

In order to challenge the current discourse around social media, the contributions in this issue do not just join the popular, and recently rather pessimistic discussions about the positive or negative implications of social media platforms, but look at a number of facets of digital infrastructure that shape our social worlds: The contributions ask what lies beyond the predominant network models and what is the history of alternative networked infrastructures that can cast a different light on the current discussion around digital cultures. How, in particular, have these alternative infrastructures existed alongside mainstream media? The contributions put up for discussion the political negotiations and struggles when it comes to the development of infrastructures. In what ways does infrastructure surface and become established? What types of commons or non-institutions emerge? Moreover, what happens when infrastructures fail and become unstable? How do we govern infrastructure and how do they govern us? Finally, the contributions pose the question how new subjectivities emerge within infrastructural settings and how infrastructural politics relate to knowledge production. By making infrastructures "unstable" and placing them at the centre of inquiry, this issue wants to scrutinize the socio-technical architectures, practices, and processes that underlie digital cultures today.

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4 Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social. An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2005, p. 16.

5 Cp. Brett M. Frischmann, *Infrastructure. The Social Value of Shared Rescources.* New York, Oxford University Press, 2012.