Reflecting and acting on datafication – CryptoParties as an example of re-active data activism

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Abstract
CryptoParties are events in which people meet to pass on their knowledge or to learn about encrypting online communication and digital media technologies or safe Internet browsing. While some people offer help in realizing these practices, others attend with their laptops, tablets and smartphones to learn how to encrypt. CryptoParties are organized by different people in different locations. The article presents results of an exploratory ethnographic study, in which public CryptoParties in Germany were analysed. The study shows that people participating in CryptoParties reflect on and criticize current processes of datafication. Moreover, they aim at shaping datafication by encrypting their online communication and digital media technologies. Therefore, CryptoParties are discussed as examples of re-active data activism in this article. Applying a critical perspective hierarchies and inequalities at these events are revealed.

Keywords
CryptoParty, data activism, datafication, encryption, media practice

Introduction
CryptoParties are events in which people meet to pass on their knowledge or to learn about secure online media practices such as encrypting online communication and digital media technologies as well as secure Internet browsing. While some people offer help in realizing these practices, others attend with their laptops, tablets and smartphones to learn how to encrypt. CryptoParties are organized by different people in different locations. They are a global phenomenon – being organized on all continents, in different cultures and national contexts, in so-called (post-)industrialized,
economically developed and less developed countries (www.cryptoparty.in/location). Even in states which are known for their repressive handling of Internet usage like China, CryptoParties exist. Many CryptoParty organizers register on the online platform www.cryptoparty.in to advertise for their events. The administrators of the platform support the organization of CryptoParties and try to build a ‘CryptoParty movement’. Still, to give a precise number of CryptoParties worldwide is not possible, not only because not all organizers register on the platform but also because many events take place irregularly.

In this article, results of an explorative ethnographic study are presented, in which I analysed CryptoParties from the perspective of media and communication studies. In the analysis, I asked the following research questions: What does a CryptoParty look like? Who are the actors involved in these events? What do people do with digital media in CryptoParties? And what are the motives and aims for these media practices?

Examining CryptoParties from the perspective of media and communication studies, the article contributes to the research field analysing datafication and media practices in general, discussing CryptoParties as an example of how people ‘act on media’ (Kannengießer and Kubitschko, 2017) to change technologies and society as such. In particular, people are ‘acting on data(fication’) (Milan, 2019). Therefore, the article also adds to the research field on data activism (Milan and Gutierrez, 2015: 121), describing CryptoParties as an example of ‘re-active data activism’ (Milan and Gutierrez, 2015: 122), as events in which ‘practices of resistance to the threats to civil and human rights that derive from corporate and government privacy intrusion’ (Milan and Gutierrez, 2015: 122) take place. With their activism, people engaged in CryptoParties aim at data justice as people aim at social justice in the context of datafication (Dencik et al., 2019: 873).

To develop this argument, the article is structured as follows. In a literature review, theories and studies are presented which sketch the relevant research field and present concepts that were useful for the analysis of CryptoParties. Second, the case studies and methods of the ethnographic study are introduced. Then, the findings of the study are presented. In the discussion, the findings are linked to the theoretical concepts presented in the literature review. The conclusion reflects on the findings and suggests future research.

Datafication and data activism

In the following section, I will draw on literature from the research field dealing with datafication and data activism to contextualize this article in this research area and explain relevant theories and concepts, which I used in the analysis of CryptoParties.

To start with, datafication is defined as all processes which render ‘into data many aspects of the world that have never been quantified before’ (Cukier and Mayer-Schoenberger, 2013: 29). Surveillance is identified as one of the main problems caused by datafication (Bakir, 2015; Lyon, 2014; Matzner, 2018). Within the last years, not only new mediated discourses on surveillance occurred (see e.g. Thorsen, 2017) but also different practices dealing with surveillance were developed. These practices, with which individuals and organizations act to face surveillance, are analysed in media activism and social movements studies, where these actions are known as data activism (e.g. Gutierrez, 2018; Milan, 2017; Milan and Gutierrez, 2015; Milan and van der Velden, 2016).

‘Data activism indicates social practices that take a critical approach to big data’ (Milan and Gutierrez, 2015: 121). It ‘can be seen as a form of socio-political mobilization, as it brings people (and information and technology) together for some kind of action variably contentious in nature,
and explicitly addressing, confronting, or engaging with datafication’ (Milan and van der Velden, 2016: 57, 62; see also Milan and van der Velden, 2018).

Data activism is a special form of media practices which are defined as

(1) both routinised and creative social practices that; (2) include interactions with media objects (such as mobile phones, laptops, pieces of paper) and media subjects (such as journalists, public relations managers, other activists); (3) draw on how media objects and media subjects are perceived and how the media environment is understood and known. (Mattoni, 2012: 159)

Practices of data activism are ways in which different actors ‘act on media’ (Kannengießer and Kubitschko, 2017) by putting media in the focus of their action. ‘The concept acting on media refers to media practices in which people consciously and actively seek to transform media technologies and in doing so try to change not only the devices but also society’ (Kannengießer, forthcoming: 179).

Milan and Gutierrez (2015: 122; see also Milan and van der Velden, 2016: 67) distinguish between ‘re-active’ and ‘pro-active’ data activism:

Re-active data activism comprises the practices of resistance to the threats to civil and human rights that derive from corporate and government privacy intrusion. Pro-active data activism embraces those individuals and civil society organisations that take advantage of the possibility for social change and civic engagement offered by big data.

Empirical studies analyse both forms of activism (for case studies see e.g. the special issue edited by Milan and van der Velden, 2018).

CryptoParties, which are the object of this article, are examples for ‘re-active’ data activism, since they perceive surveillance by states and companies as a threat caused by datafication and take action against this threat using encryption.

The CryptoParty in Berlin, which was observed for this exploratory study, is situated in the hacker scene and taking place in one of the oldest hacker spaces in Berlin run by the hacker organization c-base. Hackers and hacking are objects in communication and media studies (e.g. Schrock, 2016; Kubitschko, 2015; Coleman, 2011 and 2014). Next to hackers also human rights activists reflect on datafication and take action in the protection of citizen rights regarding their (online) privacy (e.g. Daskal, 2018; Kazansky, 2016). The concept of data justice situates questions of justice in the context of datafication (Dencik et al., 2019: 873).

The article contributes to the research field dealing with datafication and media practices in general and data activism in particular. Following a practice approach, asking what people are doing in relation to media (Couldry, 2004: 119), the article discusses a way of how activists act on media and an example of re-activist data activism.

Case studies and methods

In the following section, I will describe the explorative ethnographic study, the methods I used and the case studies I chose to conduct the study. I start with the latter. To conduct the explorative study, I chose two CryptoParties in Germany as examples of these event format. I chose case studies to get ‘a rich picture’ from and ‘analytical insights’ into (Thomas, 2016: 23) the phenomenon of CryptoParties. One of the CryptoParty chosen took place in a hackerspace in the centre of Berlin, Germany, and was organized by people who are part of the non-governmental hacker organization c-base (https://c-base.org/) running this space; the second one took place at the University of Bremen, Germany, and was
organized by students of the university in collaboration with the local group of the non-governmental organization DigitalCourage (https://digitalcourage.de/en), an organization based in Bielefeld, a city in the North of Germany, lobbying for secure online communication and organizing data literacy projects. I will give more information about both events below.

I used a focused ethnographic approach (Knoblauch, 2001), which allows to analyse a particular part of culture – that in this study are the CryptoParties. As participatory observations are central in ethnographic studies (Ayas, 2016: 337), I conducted participatory observations in the two CryptoParties mentioned above in November 2018 and January 2019, taking part as a participant seeking help but at the same time making transparent that I participate and interview for the purpose of doing research.

Within these two events, I conducted eight qualitative semi-structured interviews (Hopf, 2004) with organizers, people offering help and those seeking help. The interview partners differed in age and gender as well as educational background. But as the observations and interviews revealed, there are mainly men organizing these events and taking over the role of ‘teachers’ and dominantly men participate in seeking help. While at the event in Berlin, people from different age groups participated, it was mainly people in their 20s and 30s participating in the event in Bremen – which was because the event took place at the university. In the interviews, I asked about the background of my interview partners, what they are doing at the CryptoParty, why they are participating in these events and why they are encrypting/helping to encrypt online communication and digital media technologies. Moreover, I tried to engage with the interview partners in broader discussions about datafication and surveillance. As the organizers, as well as people helping and seeking help at the CrypoParties I visited, were very sensitive about privacy and anonymity, some interviews could only be recorded in a separated room, and afterwards transcribed, while others I needed to protocol during the interview and afterwards as I was refused permission to make recordings. The interview were done in German and are translated for this article by the author.

As the organizers of the CryptoParty in Berlin have registered on the online platform (www.cryptoparty.in), and the organizers in Bremen referred to this platform several times and perceive themselves as part of the ‘social movement’ constructed here, I also conducted a virtual ethnography (Hine, 2000) at the online platform, especially focusing on the content advertising for the events at c-base. The CryptoParty in Bremen did not advertise the event on www.cryptoparty.in, nevertheless, people organizing the event referred to the platform and this ‘movement’ during the event.

All research data (protocols of the observation as well as interview transcripts and protocols as well as protocols of the virtual ethnography) were analysed following the coding process of the Grounded Theory (Corbin and Strauss, 2008), by developing a list of categories across the whole data to compare the two different initiatives. In the following, two main results of the study will be presented: Analysing two dominant aims of CryptoParties, it is discussed how CryptoParties are educating ordinary people (Turner, 2010), who I define in this context as those people not being professionals in the field of digital media technologies and datafication, and in what way they are political.

**CryptoParties – Educational and political**

In this section, two main results will be presented, in which the aims of CryptoParties, being education and political, are discussed. Before engaging with these results, it is necessary to describe the CryptoParties I analysed more detailed.

The CryptoParty I visited in Berlin was organized in the space of the hacker organization c-base. C-base was founded in 1995 as a non-profit organization focusing on education in
hardware, software, and network technology (c-base, without date). Members of c-base invited the
organizers of the CryptoParty to organize these events in the hackerspace as the ideas of the
CryptoParty seem to match the aims of c-base.

The CryptoParty is organized once a month, starting at 8 p.m., by two people (male and female
in her early 30s and 40s) who are not members of c-base but affiliated to the hacker scene, and who
had previously organized the event at another setting in Berlin.

Members of c-base construct and tell a story about their hackerspace: The hackerspace is
designed using elements of a space-shuttle since the hacker organization has created a story in
which this space-shuttle crashed and thereby went back in time. Coming from the future, the
hackers pretend to work on technological solutions in the present to make people ‘fit’ for the future
– which they already know since they have come back from the future (c-base, without date). Being
designed as a space shuttle, the interior of the space is in silver and black, the light is bluish,
greenish, ‘aliens’ are exhibited in glass cabinets, miniature space-shuttles hang from the wall and
computer monitors hang from the ceiling. In the basement, there are also workshops where the
members of the organization can develop their ‘technological solutions for the future’, meaning
that everybody works on whatever technological project he*she is interested in.

The CryptoParty takes place on the ground floor of the building, which also includes a bar. For
the CryptoParty event, there are two bigger tables and some smaller ones arranged in the room and
a screen for the presentation with which the CryptoParty begins. People gather in this room and
some are welcomed by the organizers, others just find a chair and wait until the CryptoParty starts.
The party then begins with a short presentation by one of the organizers pointing to the problems of
data generation and surveillance and the efforts to act on datafication within the CryptoParty (see
below).

After this presentation, the organizer asks those attending the party who of them can act as
‘teachers’ to share their knowledge and with which media practices these ‘experts’ want to deal.
After some of the attendees have raised their hands and explained what kind of practices they want
to teach, people move around the room, self-organizing in groups focusing on special issues like
email encryption, Linux or on discussing and explaining how the Internet works. During the event,
some move from group to group to vary the issues they discuss and learn. There is no general end
but people leave whenever their problems or requests are resolved. The CryptoParty closes at 1
a.m., when the organizers start cleaning the room.

The CryptoParty at the University of Bremen was organized by students of the university in
collaboration with the non-governmental organization DigitalCourage based in Bielefeld and took
place in a student run café called ‘Souterrain’ at the university at an evening in January 2019. It was
the first time for the organizers conducting this event – although some of them already took part as
‘teachers’ at other CryptoParties.

The event started at 6 p.m. and finished at 9.30 p.m. Similar to the event in Berlin, the organizers
gave an introduction, explaining the concept of CryptoParties, and the encryption practices which
could be learned at that particular event. After that introduction, 17 participants formed groups
(consisting of ‘teachers’ and ‘students’) to deal with different media practices. The ‘Souterrain’ is
an ‘alternative’ student run café at the University of Bremen, the interior consists of old sofas and
some tables and there is a bar where drinks are served which are ‘paid for’ by donation. On the
walls, there are many posters advertising for ‘left wing political events’. After a while, some
participants switch among the groups, and at 9.30 p.m., the CryptoParty closed officially with one
of the organizers thanking everybody for attending. Still, many people stayed to chat.
CryptoParties aim at being education and political. How people are educated and in which way these events tend to be political is discussed in the following.

**Educating people about datafication and encryption**

In the following, the aim of CryptoParties, to educate people, is discussed, presenting some of the key findings of the ethnographic study conducted.

One of the main goals of CryptoParties is to pass on knowledge: People participate to help others encrypt their data; others seek help in these processes and are often keen to learn how to manage these processes themselves. The organizers of CryptoParties distinguish between ‘teachers’ and ‘students’ (c-base, 2018b) when referring to the people participating in these events. ‘Teachers’ are also called ‘CryptoParty angels’ as one of the organizers of the event in Berlin explains – adapting the term with which volunteers organizing the congress of the ChaosComputerClub are called. The ChaosComputerClub is Europe’s largest organization of hackers organizing a congress on any hacker-relevant topic after Christmas each year (Chaos Computer Club, 2019).

The organizers and helpers of both events examined in the ethnographic study stress in the interviews that it is the exchange of knowledge which they aim at by providing a space in which this exchange can happen.

Knowledge is indeed already passed on at the beginning of both CryptoParties through short presentations given by the organizers (see above). The organizer in Berlin starts by problematizing the current Facebook advertisement in which the company states that the user’s data are safe by presenting pictures of users who ask questions about data security. Showing a picture of one of these advertisements, the organizer compares the advertisement with a picture of a milk bottle on which a cow is presented standing on a green lawn with some flowers in front of it. Her argument is that the Facebook advertisement is as much a lie as the milk advertisement pretending that the cow giving the bottled milk had a ‘good life’: For her, Facebook taking care of its users’ privacy and happy cows in the milk industry are both a lie. She continues problematizing different aspects of datafication – criticizing companies that collect data of their users, selling those data, and not being transparent about those processes. The introduction at the CryptoParty in Bremen is much shorter: Two of the organizers are explaining the concept of the format and the different encryption practices which can be learned and done at the event.

At both parties, people form groups after the introduction – each group working on one of the encryption practices – either encrypting emails or hard drives, safe browsing, Linux in Berlin and safe smartphone use in Bremen.

During the event, people sit at tables in small groups working on these different issues. Participants talk about different roles: While some people offer help in ‘encrypted communication, preventing being tracked while browsing the web, and general security advice regarding computers and smartphones’ (c-base, 2018a), others bring their smartphones and laptops and seek help with them. Many volunteers help with dealing with concrete media practices, and others explain the background of the actions.

One woman offering to ‘explain the Internet’, as she states, at the Berlin event, brought about 20 cards on which different icons were presented symbolizing, for example, computers, routers, companies and firewalls. People participating in this group are asked to put these cards on the table in the order in which they are connected and thereby form processes of online communication.
While combining these cards, people explain the reasons for the order chosen. The woman facilitating this group asking questions to provoke explanations, answering questions herself and underlining several times that she is very new in this field, having only participated in a CryptoParty once. This first time motivated her to volunteer in further CryptoParties to share the knowledge she gained. In stressing that she is new to this, the woman invites the participants to share their knowledge and also educate her as ‘the teacher’. The discussion shows that there are experts as well as ordinary people in this field and that people learn from one another by exchanging their knowledge.

The woman moderating this discussion group corresponds with the claim of the organizers, who state: ‘A successful CryptoParty is a CryptoParty where each person learned and taught at least one new thing’ (c-base, 2018b). And this claim is actually fulfilled within the group discussing the way the infrastructure of the Internet is designed. But regarding the actual encrypting practices – this claim must be viewed critically, as the observations in both events and the interviews showed that there are strong hierarchies persisting between ‘teachers’ and ‘students’ (see below).

Still, the organizers invite ‘newcomers, beginners and the curious’, in particular, and stress that ‘absolutely no prior knowledge is required and all questions are beautiful!’ (c-base, 2018b) This is also something that the organizers of the event in Bremen stress. They hereby try to destroy any possible assumption that CryptoParties are a meeting of only technophile people or those who are experts on datafication. This is what the organizers of the CryptoParties repeat during the event – inviting anyone to pose questions. Thereby, they acknowledge that there are people who hesitate to engage with their digital media technologies:

The main objective is to tear down the mental walls which prohibit people from even thinking about these topics or picking them up as they occur throughout their lives. [...] Sadly, many people don’t consider themselves able to process them and don’t even start. That’s what we want to change. Take away the fear of cryptic and technical things (two properties inherent to cryptographic tools) so they can continue educating themselves and others. (c-base, 2018b)

Trying to educate ordinary people, those who have no professional background in the field of digital media technologies or datafication, CryptoParties claim to be open and inclusive. CryptoParties are organized by people from different backgrounds in different locations. They are organized by hacker organizations, adult education centres, people working in libraries (as described in the work of Belveze, 2017), students and others. People organizing CryptoParties claim to host open and inclusive events: ‘CryptoParty is a free and open format’ (c-base, 2018a). Organizers claim that everybody is welcome to the events:

We, the organisers and participants of CryptoParties, pledge our dedication to making our events open and welcoming to everyone who shares our guiding principles: Being excellent to each other, and doing things. [...] We would like people to be able to teach and learn from each other regardless of background or level of expertise. (c-base, 2018b)

Moreover, the CryptoParties should allow inclusion, meaning that, disabled people (e.g. in wheelchairs or with impaired eyesight or hearing) should also be able to participate in the events (c-base, 2018b). To realize an open and inclusive setting, organizers of CryptoParties have developed a ‘code of conduct’ (c-base, 2018b) which provides the guidelines for the openness and inclusiveness. The ‘code of conduct’ could be found on the tables in CryptoParty in Berlin.
To guarantee an open and inclusive event, it is argued that ‘[p]eople who act in discriminatory or otherwise excluding ways [. . .], and who are not able or willing to change their behaviour, may be excluded to preserve a welcoming atmosphere for everybody else’ (c-base, 2018b).

But it is the openness and inclusiveness which is at the same time one of the major aims of the CryptoParties and one of the major challenges. As one of the organizers of the event in Berlin stresses, it is diversity which is one of the major problems of CryptoParties. One of the organizers explains in the interview that it is very difficult to involve not only technophiles, men and people who have a higher educational background.

My participatory observation underlines her perception, since during the event in Berlin nearly all of the participants at the CryptoParty had specific questions regarding encryption, meaning that they had some previous knowledge. This does not only mean that people participating are already sensitive about questions of online privacy and surveillance but also that they are technophile in that they were already engaged with their technologies before the event.

Moreover, regarding the hierarchies, only men took over the role of ‘teachers’ during the CryptoParty in Berlin and Bremen; only one woman was a ‘teacher’ at both events, and only few women participated in the role of ‘students’. The one exception in Berlin was a woman who was not helping in the practices of encryption but organized a discussion using cards to explain the infrastructure of the Internet (see above). Interestingly, although in the position of the ‘teacher’ or ‘expert’, she several times stressed ‘being new to this’, not being an expert, something none of the male ‘teachers’ during the CryptoParty stated.

The gender gap was perpetuated by the setting of the CryptoParty in Berlin at the hackerspace of the hacker organization ‘c-base’. While the party itself took place on the ground floor, participants could take part in a ‘tour for aliens’ visiting the basement of the hackerspace. This tour revealed an insight into the hackerspace. Hackers taking part during this CryptoParty repeatedly constructed the binary between the ‘insiders’ – the members of the hacker organization – and the ‘outsiders’ – people visiting the hackerspace and the CryptoParty. It is this binary which perpetuates the hierarchy of hackers and non-hackers, ‘teachers’ and ‘students’ and ‘male’ and ‘female’ during the CryptoParty as nearly all of the members of the hacker organization (with one exception) who were at the location on that evening were male.

The organizers are aware of these hierarchies which result out of the different roles that participants have: ‘While we acknowledge the implicit and practical hierarchies and power-relations within the CryptoParty community, extra effort may be put into resolving them’ (c-base, 2018b). Nevertheless, these hierarchies have not been deconstructed. It is the location chosen, the hackerspace, which attracts people from a special, technophile scene and implies inhibitions for others. The setting of the CryptoParty regulates the target group – those CryptoParties taking place in libraries or adult education centres attract other people than those taking place in hackerspaces.

In the event in Bremen, mostly students participated during this event which was caused by the location – the event taking place at the university. Only two ‘teachers’ were not students but part of the local group of the organization DigitalCourage.

The target groups not only result from the location where the events take place but also result from the way organizers advertise for the CryptoParties. One of the organizers of the Berlin event explains that they advertise using posters or flyers although the best public relations for her is still mouth-to-mouth propaganda, which means for the hackerspace CryptoParty in Berlin that mainly the hackers themselves and the people they know are involved. Looking at the public relations, the organizers of the CryptoParty in Berlin conduct, one of the constraints to the aims and practices of the CryptoParties can be found. As one of the organizers of the Berlin event explains, they also use
Twitter for advertising the event, admitting in the interview that ‘Twitter is also evil’, but that they still use it to reach out to more people.

Nevertheless, there are some people involved in CryptoParties who switch roles from ‘teachers’ to ‘students’ and thereby permeate the hierarchies. Several people organizing CryptoParties or acting as ‘teachers’ had been participants of these events before and their positive experiences within the first CryptoParties they attended made them get involved more regularly as organizers and helpers (see above). Organizers and ‘teachers’ offer ‘train the trainers’ seminars between the CryptoParty events, to enable people to become ‘teachers’. During these training sessions, people are educated in how to explain basic knowledge of how the Internet works or the first steps in encrypting online communication and hardware.

Cryptoparties are spaces where people help others to help themselves. The aim is not to encrypt for other people but to teach people to encrypt their data themselves:

Even when there are weird problems with a computer, take your time to dictate and explain even complicated procedures and commands. The student will learn more, and if consequent problems arise from these actions maybe even weeks after the CryptoParty, the person who owns the computer might remember what was done, and what might be a source of a problem. (c-base, 2018b)

To make people engage with their media technologies, the organizers of both events stress that the keyboards of other people’s media devices are ‘lava’ and therefore nobody is allowed to touch the media device of somebody else: ‘Other people’s keyboards are lava. Don’t touch anyone’s keyboard, but your own’ (c-base, 2018b).

Because of these aims and the observed practices during the events, CryptoParties can be described as educational events in which people pass on and share knowledge.

**Empowering ordinary people and transforming datafication**

Through the education taking place at CryptoParties, ordinary people should become empowered regarding their use of digital media technologies and datafication processes. In this context, empowerment can be defined as ‘knowing more about technology and making more informed choices around technology as a result’ (Rosner and Ames, 2014: 326). One of the organizers at the CryptoParty in Berlin tries to empowering users of digital media by educating them in encryption processes: ‘I give people the possibility to get back a piece of their privacy during this one evening’. She thinks that she changes the lives of a small number of people at every CryptoParty that she organizes; this is her motivation for organizing these events. Doing the interview and observing her position within the event, it becomes obvious, that it is this feeling of being able to change something in people’s lives, of knowing more than others and teaching them is what drives her. This self-efficacy is one of the key motivations for people organizing these events or serving as ‘teachers’, as other interviews also reveal.

The feeling of empowerment through sharing and gaining knowledge is also stressed on the platform of the CryptoParty network:

People come together and learn from one another how to protect their privacy online in times of pervasive commercial tracking and state surveillance. [...] After a few hours everybody has learned something and leaves with new ideas and a sense of empowerment. (c-base, 2018a)

For one of the organizers in Berlin, organizing the CryptoParty is a contribution to democracy, which for her means empowering people to take informed action regarding encryption and online
privacy. According to the online platform, which states the same, she stresses that new ideas can only be developed in private spaces where the new practices are not judged but can be tried first. For her, trying new things and democracy are interlinked: ‘every deviance from the norm can only take place in a protected space where I can be sure that there is no judgment or only judgment by people whom I invite into that secure space’.

Another organizer of a CryptoParty taking place in Dresden, Germany, who is participating in the event in Berlin, says that democracy is about the accessibility of information, which is the reason for him to organize CryptoParties and share information about encryption.

The logo presented on the CryptoParty platform consists of the word ‘CryptoParty’, which is written in letters that have the style of the Commodore 64 as well as two keys that suggest privacy – the possibility to log information, data, into a ‘secure space’. Next to the logo, a slogan says: ‘Party like it’s December 31st, 1983’. This refers to the novel by George Orwell ‘Nineteen Eighty-Four’, in which a totalitarian surveillance state is constructed (Orwell, 1992 [1949]). CryptoParties invite people to live in a society which is non-totalitarian and does not spy on citizens while stressing the ‘fun’ within this event and the society aimed at. But this slogan ignores the fact that there were societies before 1984 which had been totalitarian surveillance states, for instance under National Socialism between 1933 and 1945 in Germany.

Organizers and people helping and teaching encryption practices aim at transforming society, which they perceive as problematic regarding privacy, into one in which (online) privacy is guaranteed. One of the helpers in Bremen explains that ‘privacy disappears’ in the current society and that ‘mass surveillance’ is invisible and that is why she participates in the CryptoParties to help sensitizing people to surveillance and to help people to get their (online) privacy back. One of the helpers in Bremen explains that CryptoParties for her lead to social transformation – a transformation aiming at a society with less surveillance and in which people have a lock on their media devices.

It is perceived as necessary to ‘protecting yourself in the digital space’ (CryptoParty, 2018a). Here, an insecure environment is constructed in which people need to protect themselves. CryptoParties are organized for people who want to protect themselves from mass surveillance, explains one of the organizers of the CryptoParty in Berlin:

I think it’s important for people to feel that they can decide for themselves which data about them exist outside, which data is used, and how it is used, if the data is stored, how long it is stored, who analyses the data, if the data is sold and to whom it is sold. [. . .] And I think this does not happen unless I start with my small device, with my decision which browser I use, with my decision whether I encrypt emails or not.

At the same time, she thinks that the protection of data privacy should not be something that one needs to fight for. Nevertheless, as long as it is not the status quo, she appeals to the users. The format of CryptoParties and the organizers put the users of digital media in the responsible position – dealing with the problems and challenges of datafication such as surveillance and the protection of privacy. People organizing these events do not lobby at national or international political levels or take action against (multinational) corporations which they criticize but focus on the micro level, calling on the users to take action by encrypting their media practices.

CryptoParties are political events aiming at transforming datafication processes and society through changes to user habits: ‘In CryptoParties, we invite people to change their habits’, explains one of the organizers. And on the platform, CryptoParties are politicized: ‘While CryptoParties are inherently political, they are independent from any political party or politics in general. Political
parties may not facilitate CryptoParties in their name’ (c-base, 2018b). The political aims of the organizers are to protect (online) privacy:

Privacy is a space where ideas can thrive. A retreat, both physical and digital, where you can explore and experiment whenever you want to. Governments and companies seem increasingly unwilling to respect this fundamental human right of informational self-determination, so we have to take matters into our own hands. (c-base, 2018a)

In disobeying the logics of datafication processes, CryptoParties can be perceived as examples of re-active data activism. The encryption practices are ‘practices of resistance to the threats to civil and human rights that derive from corporate and government privacy intrusion’ (Milan and Gutierrez, 2015: 122, see above). With the practices of encryption, people ‘act on media’ (Kannengießer and Kubitschko, 2017) as they put media technologies at the centre of their action and thereby not only seek at transforming the devices but society on the whole. The aim of the transformation is a just society, in which people are empowered to take their own decisions on the use of data; therefore, CryptoParties are practices of data justice (Dencik et al., 2019).

CryptoParties are not only political in that sense that they try to empower people regarding the reflection of datafication processes and abilities to encrypt online communication processes and digital media technologies but they are also anti-capitalist.

The organizers of both events stress that CryptoParties are non-commercial: the events are free of charge, although donations are welcome (c-base, 2018b). Moreover, ‘[a]ll content produced for or under the label “CryptoParty” needs to be released under creative commons zero (CC0, this is equivalent to public domain), or at least share-alike, attribution (CC by-sa) licence’ (c-base, 2018b). The sponsoring of these events is rejected (c-base, 2018b).

Free software and open hardware are recommended for use at CryptoParties, although the organizers admit that the use of software and hardware that the participants already use is fine (c-base, 2018b). Also the helpers within the different groups at both events recommend using open software. Therefore, CryptoParties are not only non-commercial but also anti-capitalist.

Next to the political implications of empowerment and anti-capitalism, also the social aspect of CryptoParties is stressed and politicized again: ‘People will be more comfortable given enough time for socializing’ (c-base, 2018b). It is the social aspect which is highlighted by the term CryptoParty; as one of the organizers of the event in Berlin describes it: ‘People come together, have fun, drink beer, are chummy and learn something about encryption and anonymization’.

CryptoParties differ in how much they highlight this social aspect; while some events, especially in adult education centres or libraries, focus on the learning aspect and construct an educational setting, others focus on the social aspect and stress the party-character within CryptoParties, for example, by organizing ‘real’ party-settings with music, DJs and dancing.

The social aspects also imply political meanings as collaboration is one of the key aims of the organizers: ‘Collaborate! We are in this together. Always. Shared joy is double the joy, shared grief half the grief’ (c-base, 2018b). With ‘in this’, the organizers mean the datafied society, which they perceive as problematic. ‘We are in this together’ constructs a community of people, a Verge-meinschaftung in Weber’s sense (Weber, 1972: 21), in which people come together who share the same aims and have a feeling of belonging. This feeling of belonging can be perceived in the social aspect within the concept of CryptoParties. One of the organizers of a CryptoParty in Dresden participating in the event in Berlin stresses that he himself feels very comfortable during this event and that he perceives that many people, who have psychological problems come to the hackerspace
in Dresden, and are tolerated there and sometimes even live there. And one person ‘teaching’ at the
CryptoParty in Bremen explains that the event is fun for her especially because of the ‘community’
that she finds at the event. One organizer at the event in Bremen stresses that not encrypting is not
solidary as the privacy of those people encrypting is threatened by those not encrypting. Thereby,
he constructs a solidarity community meeting in the CryptoParty event – sharing the aim of privacy
using the strategy of encryption. One organizer at the event in Berlin stresses that for her the events
are not only about encryption but also a space where people are ‘excellent’ to one another – which
is also one of the slogans of the CryptoParties (see below).

Although the CryptoParties examined are not parties as such, they have a social character which
becomes obvious when identifying a community which meets at these events. Moreover, there are
several other characters which makes the events social: in both events, people chat about
encryption, surveillance and online privacy but also other topics, have drinks, and at the event in
Bremen, two people brought their guitars, played and sang while other were encrypting.

Although striving to create a social event, the organizers of CryptoParties not only aim at
anonymity in online media practices but also try to guarantee anonymity during these events:

A registration may never be required to attend a CryptoParty. If the organisers would like the parti-
cipants to register to be able to plan ahead better, it must be obvious how to do so anonymously/
pseudonymously. […] As CryptoParties are privacy-advocating events, filming and the taking of
pictures or the recording of audio are prohibited. (c-base, 2018b)

One of the organizers of the event in Bremen stresses that it is definitely not allowed to take any
pictures during the event or record anything.

The results presented in this section show that CryptoParties are political events which reflect
on and criticize current datafication processes and try to transform society by empowering ordinary
people.

**Conclusion**

The results of the explorative ethnographic study, in which two case studies of CryptoParties in
Berlin and Bremen, Germany, were analysed, which are presented in this article, show that
CryptoParties aim at educating people about datafication and the media practice of encryption.
Thereby, CryptoParties aim to *empower* ordinary people by on the one hand informing them about
critical aspects of datafication processes and on the other hand enabling them to engage with their
digital media technologies, encrypt those and online communication processes. In doing so,
CryptoParties get a political meaning as people involved in these events try to transform datafi-
cation processes through a change in media practices and thereby try to transform society.

Putting media technologies at the centre of their action, people participating in CryptoParties,
those organizing these events, teaching about encryption and those bringing technologies to encrypt,
‘act on media’ (Kannengießer and Kubitschko 2017) – not only trying to change digital media
technologies but also society as such. They ‘act on media’ as people in CryptoParties *consciously* and
actively engage with media technologies to cause social change (Kannengießer, forthcoming: 179).

Moreover, the results show that CryptoParties are examples of re-active data activism as the
encryption of digital media technologies and online communication processes are ‘practices of
resistance to the threats to civil and human rights that derive from corporate and government
privacy intrusion’ (Milan and Gutierrez, 2015: 122), which in this case mainly is the threat to
privacy. In CryptoParties, people reflect on and act on datafication. During Cryptoparties, people
disobey the logic of datafication and try to resist data-generating processes by encrypting their
digital communication processes. The aim of the transformation is a just society, in which people
are empowered to take their own decisions on the use of data; therefore, CryptoParties are practices
of data justice (Dencik et al., 2019).

In doing so, people do not act individually but in a collective meeting at the CryptoParties.
People in CryptoParties share their aims and experience a feeling of belonging. Therefore,
CryptoParties can be identified as Vergemeinschaftungen (communities) (Weber, 1972: 21).

The explorative ethnographic study gave insights into the phenomenon of CryptoParties, about
what these events look like, the media practices taking place and the aims of the people involved as
well as the constraints which were found within the practices and aims. As stated above, Crypto-
Parties are a global phenomenon, and a comparative study could give insightful results about how the
events differ in different cultural and national contexts, whether people organizing the parties share
similarities regarding their background and their aims or whether the media practices which are
conducted within these events differ because of different national or cultural affordances.

Note

1. The capital P within the term CryptoParty is used by the organizers of these events and the administrators
   of the online platform trying to build a network among these events (www.cryptoparty.in) to stress the
   combination of the two words.

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