How do we think about networks under post-digital conditions? What does this imply for research?

This journal issue takes as its outset, the call of the transmediale festival to “[leave] behind a decade marked by a backlash against the Internet and the network society” in order to re-evaluate the limits of ‘networks’. It refers to Robert Filliou’s “The Eternal Network,” an idealistic notion from the 1960s, pointing to the interconnectedness of everyday-life actions across an emerging global world at that time. This is a good reminder that network cultures exist beyond the technical reality of network culture as we now know it despite our primary identification of networks with social media and planetary computation. By drawing on the legacies of critical and autonomous network cultures, the aim was to make the limits of Internet-based networks visible but also highlight alternatives. Is there a conceivable counter-power to networks? Which alternative technological models and cultural narratives are needed to construct the principles of end-to-end communication anew? How might the critique of networks extend to non-western contexts and reflect the limits in a global perspective?

The periodizing logic of networks

To answer such complex questions, it may be useful to reflect on the periodizing logic that invites us to leave behind “the backlash against the Internet.” What comes before and after the network?

The German media theorist Harmut Winkler has proposed that, in a historical perspective, the discourse around “new media” repeatedly emphasize the “anti-hierarchical character of the new medium”: an utopia where social mediation is suspended. Winkler, writing in 1997, quotes Tim Berners-Lee for saying “There will be an explosion; more and more people will write about themselves”. The World Wide Web, in other words, came with a dream of a future that extends our social life into a universe where everyone becomes equal in the sense that every point in the network is equally far away (or close) to everyone, everyone author is equal, and everyone has the right to speak (unlike censored mass media): “Consensus-building appears to be superfluous, and it seems that the hierarchizing social machine has lost its power.” (213-214)

The networked computer as a “social structure in a 1:1 map” and a “pure extension” of social interaction parallels a more general historical ideal of technical images. The construction of technical images has always claimed to come as a 1:1 reality without language, social conventions and compression: a “liberated […] universe through which hope passes.” In this sense, the utopia of networked media is yet another example of how technological media “chose the escape to iconicity;” or, media without representation (ibid). It is a discourse that fails to acknowledge both that signification is arbitrary and messy (mediated by someone, something, somewhere), and that the process of ‘standardization’ (that ignores the arbitrariness of media) is a recurring cultural figure: every (Western) social structure has always attempted to place its own iconic media in the universe. What other beginnings and ends of networks might there be?

Messy networks that fall apart

Networks are everywhere – intrinsic to all (de)centralized human and non-human ‘business’ and communication. However, the
once canonical model of centralized, decen-
tralized and distributed networks is in need
of differentiation and more detail today (as
a cultural form as well as a socio-technical
reality). This means broadening the discus-
sion of networks to other ecologies that
would include non-human elements such
as animals, energy, clouds, climate, and
so on. A key reference here might be Anna
Lowenhaupt Tsing’s work on matsutake
mushrooms and global supply chains that
define messy networks of ruin and regrowth,
with people very much entangled with nonhu-
man entities. In a world increasingly defined
by capitalist ecological devastation (and the
spread of infectious disease, as we write),
Tsing asks “What do you do when your world
starts to fall apart? I go for a walk, and if I’m
lucky, I find mushrooms.” (1) Her argument
is that it’s not productive to dwell on destruc-
tion no matter how bleak the scenario may
seem, as this perpetuates the same logic
that produced it in the first place, but instead
look to resilient life-forms that can suggest
ways of surviving precarity and the messes
we have created for ourselves. Even in the
ruins we can find hopeful descriptions of sup-
ply chains that use networks productively to
thrive as part of broader eco-systems, and
that stress “ephemeral assemblages and
multidirectional histories.” (61)

There is a strong sense that despite
this ever-lasting debate over networks and
their potential to rethink eco-socio-technical
structures, relatively little of this network
thinking has permeated the artworld or re-
search cultures in other than straightforward
ways. The articles presented in this journal
issue take up the invitation to explore this
line of thinking and ask what it means to
research networks, and more-over to think
beyond the organizational logic of the acad-
emy to other forms of organizing knowledge
production and distribution.[1] What are the
limits of research networks and what would
an end-to-end principle of research look like?

In each their own way the authors of
this journal issue deconstruct the really exist-
ing and imaginary network; they highlight its
cultural, political, ecological, geopolitical and
colonial implications seen from diverse and
local cultural contexts as well as the perspec-
tive of a globalization, and through various
cultural and artistic practice they invite the
reader to contemplate this beginnings and
ends of networks.

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Notes

[1] A raw and messy unedited version
of the mail list exchange can be down-
loaded from https://transmediale.de/content/
research-networks-1.
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