The Time of Tactical Media

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Abstract

Assuming the premise that what characterizes tactical media is their temporality, the here and now of daily experience, the essay questions the role they could play today. The argument makes a synthetic tour through the history and theory of tactical media from its popularization in the nineties, attending to its decline at the beginning of the 21st century with the rise of the web 2.0, until its disappearance from the dystopian horizon of the current dominant discourses on digital culture, centered on strategies. Paradoxically, social media platforms now seem to be the only ones interested in research on the uses in themselves as advocated by Michel de Certeau. The conclusion proposes to recover the analysis of tactics in its original sense, attending again to the everyday uses of the many and not only the abuses of the few, in order to understand the present of tactical media.

Keywords

tactical media, popular culture, semiotic warfare, media histories, net critique, culture jamming, communication guerrilla, infowar, collective action.

Introduction

At the end of September 2023, I was invited to participate in a colloquium on tactical media organized by students from the National Autonomous University of Mexico. My first reaction upon receiving the invitation was one of surprise. I could not understand why, after having been absent from the debates on art and media activism for so many years, this notion was now reappearing, so I used this question as a starting point to think about the role that tactical media could play today. Under the assumption that most of the young university students attending the event would not already know what the term referred to, I began by talking about its origin in the nineties, then went on to summarize the main arguments that arose against it at the beginning of the 21st century, when its death was even declared, and ended by launching some provocations to think about its actuality. If anything characterizes the tactical media is its relationship with time, the live time, the here and now of our experience.

I had to send the presentation recorded in a video of maximum 15 minutes to avoid possible difficulties with the connection. My reflections acquired the status of just another media event that would be quickly forgotten after being rebroadcast. It never crossed my mind that these concerns could have a space beyond that moment, much less that I would encounter the same problem again in the program of another colloquium organized for the following year. This essay is the fruit of that coincidence between Mexico and Australia. Then as now, its descriptive, simple and didactic argument is a result of truly concerns with our owned present.

The Past of Tactical Media

The term began to be used in Amsterdam in 1993 within the Next Five Minutes Conferences initially dedicated to TV and video and then to the Internet and the so called "new media" which were discontinued in 2003. A few years later, the manifesto *The ABC of Tactical Media* published by GeertLovink and David Garcia for the launching of the Tactical Media Network website, hosted by Waag, the Society for Old and New Media, synthesized the criteria for experimenting with the ubiquity of the message, regardless of the medium used.

Tactical Media are what happens when the cheap 'do it yourself' media, made possible by the revolution in consumer electronics and expanded forms of distribution (from public access cable to the internet) are exploited by groups and individuals who feel aggrieved by or excluded from the wider culture. Tactical media do not just report events, as they are never impartial, they always participate and it is this that more than anything separates them from mainstreammedia. [1]

The media were thought of as a means of subjective expression. Groups and individuals in Europe and the United States focused on the appropriation, *détournement*, reuse and modification of available discourses and technologies to unveil their contradictions. They created unexpected situations and controversial, even sensationalist, and often comical events that attracted the interest of the mainstream media. Eager for novelty to capture the audience, they turned tactical interventions into news and made them reach the general public, distorting the type of messages that these same channels circulated, turning them into involuntary accomplices of their own sabotage. The boundaries between reality and fiction were left in suspense.

In these days of obsession with the Greta Gerwig's movie, *Barbie*, it is useful to recall the intervention attributed to the RTMark collective, the *Barbie Liberation Organization* (B.L.O.) of 1993. [2] As their new website - barbieliberation.org- states: "This shadowy collective of creative mercenaries-turned- activist [B.L.O.] orchestrated a covert campaign of cultural insurgency." After replacing the chip in some 300 Teen Talk Barbies with pre-recorded phrases such as "Wanna go shopping?" or "I love school! Don't you?" with that of the G.I. Joes, "Troops! Attack!" or "Dead men tell no lies", they were returned to the stores right before Christmas, along with a video sent to the press explaining the whole operation and a published list of detailed instructions, so that anyone who wanted to, could perform the "surgery" at home, baffling families and journalists alike.

Another well-known project was *FloodNet* from Electronic Disturbance Theater (EDT) (1998), a Java applet that disrupted traffic to a specific web server and wrote messages to its error log like "justice not found", a manual kind of DDOS (distributed denial-of-service), used against the websites of the Pentagon, the Mexican government and the Frankfurt Stock Exchange in support of the Zapatistas. *The Zapatista Tactical Flood Network* put into practice the electronic civil disobedience theorized by Critical Art Ensemble, adapting some of the ideas of Thoreau's famous century- old essay of similar name for the new realm of cyberspace, in turn coordinating peaceful street protests.[3][4] In response, the Pentagon launched a denial of service attack of its own. It was "the first time - that we know of - that the U.S. military launched a cyber counter-offensive against people within the United States." [5]

The Rand Corporation, a U.S. government's military think tank, included these practices in its research on Netwar or Infowar where the Zapatista movement was considered a paradigm case. [6] Novel forms of online and on-the-ground networked organization were used by groups as diverse as terrorists, guerrillas, criminals and activists, facilitating rapid swarming coordination without a central command and increasing the speed of concentration and dispersion. It was considered that within the netwar spectrum, information-age ideologies were being created, in which identities and loyalties may shift from the nation-state to the transnational level of "global civil society". In turn, artists and activists appropriated the concept of the Rand, to which Ars Electronica has dedicated a festival where FloodNet was presented as an eight-hours action that drew around 10,000 participants. [7][8]

Tactical media responded to the imperative of the times. The projects shared a sense of contingency with performance art and political actions. They were made "on the fly" in a concrete public space, and required the participation and presence of the public to complete their meaning, assuming from the beginning the possibility that their interventions might fail or even have effects contrary to those desired.

"Whatever media provide the best means for communication and participation in a given situation are the ones that they will use. Specialization does not predetermine action" wrote Critical Art Ensemble in their 2001 book *Digital Resistance: Explorations in Tactical Media*. [9] It was thought that amateurs were not driven by prestige or money like professionals, and had the ability to see through dominant paradigms, were freer to recombine elements of paradigms long thought to be dead, and could apply the experience of everyday life to their deliberations.

Instead of focusing solely on the creation of independent, alternative, pirate or grassroots media, the objective was to question with punctual interventions the technical and social functioning of the centers of communication and control of corporations and governments, and to do so in the public eye in order to get out of the niche where these same media were isolated. It also guaranteed a break with the confinement of the so-called radical artistic practices in galleries and museums by displacing the actions to the ordinary sphere of communications. Premises that also appear in culture jamming or guerrilla communication, which emerged in these same years, just at the time when the Internet ceased to be a public service and began to be commercialized. [10][11]

At the beginning of the 21st century, the rise of the blogosphere and Web 2.0 social media eclipsed this trend, which was thus limited to the first decade of the Internet as a mass medium, between 1995 and 2005.

The movement as a whole began to dissolve as increasingly people were doing tactical media without thinking about Tactical Media. In a way, Tactical Media was so successful in establishing new political practices that it could no longer serve as a distinctive approach that would define a particular community. [12]

The new media had become a means of subjective expression but *The Net Delusion* was not long in coming. Evgeny Morozov showed the effect that the freedom of the networks had had in countries with authoritarian regimes. [13] People now watched themselves and their images of denunciation were used to identify and arrest them. People were now policing themselves. Bloggers were also gradually becoming professionalized and paid by the big brands. The figure of the amateur was seriously called into question. In addition, "the 9/11 attacks seemed to delegitimise the already habitual procedures of symbolic intervention that many media activists would follow. With their most valuable weapon seemingly taken from their hands, the activists felt left behind and almost ready to concede victory to the spectacle of hyper-violence." [14]

The Future of Tactical Media

However, the first academic publication dedicated to tactical media appeared in 2009. Rita Raley's book extends the idea and life of tactical media by offering them a future just at the moment of their decline, as an intellectual work, a hybrid form of academic critique, which she calls "virtuosic performance." In Raley's words, "tactical media contributes the discourse on the digital humanities by examining the aesthetic and critical practices that have specifically emerged out of, and in direct response to, both the postindustrial society and the neoliberal globalization." [15]

From the sociology of knowledge, she analyzes the responses that these virtuosic performances offer to migratory policies, virtual warfare and financial markets through a review of highly specialized scientific literature along with mention of social and political events of great significance. She stresses that tactical media polemics would never have sought a structural transformation of the social in the style of the old revolutionary avant-gardes. Their belief in the micropolitics of disruption, intervention and education are characterized by the postmodern turn that identifies them with Nicolas Bourriaud's relational aesthetics where human interactions and their social context constitute a theoretical horizon, and the public is an experiential and not an ontological entity. [16]

To projects that operate on both the symbolic and the technological level through reverse engineering and simultaneous praise for the amateur, hacker and DIY culture of the nineties, she adds more recent works of data visualization that hide hardware and software in the elaboration of sophisticated audiovisual metaphors from mathematical models. The differences between them would only be in the degree of virtuosity, in the level of technical and semiotic expertise exhibited in a public space that again may well be the gallery or the museum. The possibility of a critical consciousness under capitalism required more than ironic consumption, alternative marketing and parodic games. "What my primary themes -immigration politics, war, capital- should indicate is that these practices, whether written under the sign of art, culture work, or guerrilla tactics, are strongest when informed by, and responsive to, an intellectual discourse that allows them to rise to the level of legitimate cultural critique." [17]

Raley offered a future for tactical media but removed them from the reach of the consumer and the amateur producer, minimizing their political importance in favor of an interpretation that highlights their epistemic value and grants them an elitist position within the academy. Everything the opposite of how the tactical media were originally conceived, inspired by the work of Michel de Certeau *The Practice of the Everyday Life* of 1975.

The Present of Tactical Media

The practice of the everyday life is organized around the relationship between the strategies of the institutions that order the social space in its material and symbolic sense, and the tactics by which ordinary people temporarily reverse conditions imposed on them. Inspired by the differences between language (a system) and speech (an act), strategies and tactics make it possible to relate the problem of the utterances of speech acts with the contexts of use with non-linguistic practices such as walking, dwelling, eating, etc. The act constitutes the now, the present around which there is a before and an after, the temporality of existence, an ontological condition, I fear, both for the artist, as well as for the public.

De Certeau insists that people are not, after all, idiots, emphasizing in the study of popular cultures the agency of the consumers whom he calls "users" because they would be experts in the ancient art of making use of "the cracks that particular conjunctions open in the surveillance of the proprietary powers." [18] Tactics are an art of the weak that depends on the vagaries of time and cunning, not on expertise or specialization. "What is called 'popularization' or 'degradation' of a culture is from this point of view a partial and caricatural aspect of the revenge that utilizing tactics take on the power that dominates production." [19] Use must thus be analyzed in itself.

William Burroughs had done this analysis a few years before. In *The Electronic Revolution* he presented the theory that a virus is a very small unit of word and image and explained how such units could be biologically activated as transmissible viral strains through the then new recorders and players to, for example, spread rumors or discredit an opponent, mixing and overriding pre-established associative lines. [20] A war in the "empire of signs" which for Burroughs had only just begun and whose consequences seem evident today. Fake news, deep fakes, right wing memes, dataveillance scandals, cyberbullying, social media addiction, data kidnapping, digital extractivism, hate speeches, conspiracy theories... illustrate the current state of semiotic warfare unleashed in the context of the postindustrial society and the neoliberal globalization. The tactical media of the last century has even been accused of feeding contemporary far-right currents of extremist groups such as QAnon. [21][22]

The dystopian reading of the present that is promoted not only by the mainstream media, but also by academia and the arts, grants absolute power to algorithms, big data, platforms and artificial intelligences over users, denying them any kind of agency just at the time of the rise of re-

gressive policies that seemed a thing of the past. In the course of barely three decades we have seen notions such as "virtual communities", "smart mobs", "collective intelligence", "p2p society" or "digital commons" among others, disappear -along with the tactics- from the dominant discourses and debates, displaced by "algorithmic governance", "planetary-scale computation", "surveillance" or "platform capitalism", "artificial intelligence", and so on. Paradoxically, social media platforms now seem to be the only ones interested in research on the uses in themselves, not of the elites but of the majorities, as advocated by de Certeau. I doubt very much that this disdain for the "vul-garization" or "degradation" of contemporary digital cultures in which especially the younger ones live will help us to find solutions to the current conflicts. Are the practices of everyday life reduced to hate and violence? Is there no more love in the telematic embrace? [23] Uses, and not only abuses must be analyzed once again. Then and only then will we be able to understand the present of tactical media, our present.

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