

**Participation, Remediation, Bricolage:  
Considering Principal Components of a Digital Culture**

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## **Participation, Remediation, Bricolage: Considering Principal Components of a Digital Culture**

### **Abstract**

Within media theory the worldwide shift from a 19<sup>th</sup> century print culture via a 20<sup>th</sup> century electronic culture to a 21<sup>st</sup> century digital culture is well documented. In this essay the emergence of a digital culture as amplified and accelerated by the popularity of networked computers, multiple-user software and Internet is investigated in terms of its principal components. A digital culture as an undetermined praxis is conceptualized as consisting of participation, remediation and bricolage. Using the literature on presumably 'typical' Internet phenomena such as the worldwide proliferation of Independent Media Centres (*Indymedia*) linked with (radical) online journalism practices and the popularity of (individual and group) weblogging, the various meanings and implications of this particular understanding of digital culture are explored. In the context of this essay digital culture can be seen as an emerging set of values, practices and expectations regarding the way people (should) act and interact within the contemporary network society. This digital culture has emergent properties with roots both in online and offline phenomena, with links to trends and developments pre-dating the World Wide Web, yet having an immediate impact and particularly changing the ways in which we use and give meaning to living in an increasingly interconnected, always on(line) environment.

**Keywords:** Radical Online Journalism, New Media Theory, Cyberculture, Internet Culture, Citizen Media

**Running Head:**

In this essay I aim to identify the principal components of an emerging global digital culture as these are expressed in examples of (radical) online journalism, weblogging, and the online praxis of Independent Media Centres. My analysis rests on two key assumptions regarding trends or shifts in contemporary new media and social theory. First, the realization that all aspects of everyday life in highly industrialized modern societies are to some extent influenced by, and implicated in computerization. As Manovich (2001: 19) states: “Today we are in the middle of a new media revolution - the shift of all culture to computer-mediated forms of production, distribution, and communication.” This culture has been labelled many things – cyberculture by Lévy (2001), information culture by Manovich (2001), interface culture by Johnson (1997), Internet culture by Castells (2001), or virtual culture in cybersociety by Jones (1998) to name but a few. The main problem with most of this work has been the often implicit conflation of ‘culture’ – as in the shared norms, values, practices and expectations of a group of people – with communication technologies.<sup>1</sup> Although I do not want to argue that the use of technology has no consequences for either humans or machines, I do find this argument problematic in that it at times mistakes the new spaces opened up by communications technology for new forms of culture (Calcutt, 1998). Although there is a burgeoning body of literature on all things digital and cultural containing eloquent critiques of technodeterminism, utopianism or dystopianism (see for example Silver 2000 and 2004; Trend, 2001), one is left with an unanswered question: what kind of values and expectations are expressed in this ‘digital culture’ (Gere, 2002)? A second assumption takes into consideration contemporary social changes accelerated by globalization, post-nationalism and individualization. If one accepts for a moment that these three key trends are constitutive elements of global culture, the implication in the context of new media theory and the literature on digital culture could be, that ‘cyberculture’ is in fact not a function of either humans or machines, but an expression of an increasingly individualized society in a globalized world.

In other words, I consider digital culture in the context of this essay as an emerging value-system and set of expectations as particularly expressed in the activities of news and information media makers and users online, whereas I see the praxis of digital culture as an expression of individualization, post-nationalism and globalization. From this it also follows that I am less interested in the wide variety of things that people do or talk about online than in the values and expectations such communicative acts refer to. As primary sources of evidence I will use a case-based approach to:

- The literature on the challenges posed by (radical) online journalism inasmuch these works refer to the changing relationships between the consumers and producers of news<sup>2</sup>;
- The proliferation of open publishing initiatives as particularly exemplified by the proliferation of Independent Media Centres (IMC, or: *Indymedia*) around the world since the 1999 anti-WTO protests in Seattle<sup>3</sup>;
- The popularity of all kinds of individualized storytelling online such as weblogs and podcasts<sup>4</sup>.

Underlying this discussion of digital culture is a view beyond the consideration of whether or not the various components or elements can be considered ‘new’. As I will explain in this essay, media participation, remediation and our behavior as bricoleurs are not brand new phenomena that jumped into being the moment the first computer went online. Nor are these components particular to the production and consumption of either commercial, creative commons or free news and information. These components must be seen as pervasive and historical, as Lessig (2004: 184) explains: “In the next ten years we will see an explosion of digital technologies. These technologies will enable almost anyone to capture and share content. Capturing and sharing content, of course, is what humans have done since the dawn of man. It is how we learn and communicate. But capturing and sharing through digital technology is different.” This essay aims to capture what is different and emergent about a culture whose basic elements have always been there.

### **Principal Components**

Although the macro-level approach in this analysis does not consider the complexity of different types of acts within these different cases, it must be clear that all examples of online journalisms, open publishing platforms and the *petit narratives* of the blogosphere have different and similar characteristics which can be plotted in a diagram on an open versus closed participatory axis and an individual versus collective axis (see Deuze, 2003: 205). However, that is beyond the purpose of this article as I would like to move beyond particularities to generalities in the ways in which norms, values and expectations can be considered to be principal components of digital culture. My principal component analysis takes its cue from two sources: empiry and theory. In statistics principal component analysis (PCA) is a technique used to recognize patterns in a dataset by organizing the variance hierarchically, thereby only selecting those components that display the greatest variance for

analysis. In social theory – particularly in the work of Luhmann (1990) – principal components are seen as essential constituents of social systems that “transform themselves into themselves” (Mingers, 2004: 404). Luhmann considers principal components as the discernible elements participating in the composition of a composite unity through communication, which unit in the context of this essay would refer to the emerging value system of digital culture, as expressed (and reproduced) by blogging, open publishing, and via the connectivity offered by (radical) online journalisms. Thus operationalizing the concept of principal components, their actual participation in the realization of a digital culture is the key to identifying them. For my analysis this for example means that the act of blogging or open publishing an *Indymedia* website in itself does not constitute digital culture, but the preferred values as well as the expectations of how others (should) act those acts refer to. Although this treatment does not do justice to the rich literature on either PCA or Luhmann’s autopoietic social systems theory, I offer these references as markers of my method of selecting certain cases, highlighting specific practices within these phenomena, and attributing quality and weight to particular acts and interpretations of such acts—while ignoring others. This is, in short, a way to recognize a pattern by considering case studies in online journalism, open publishing and blogging, which pattern is then analyzed in terms of how it reproduces (and thus: privileges) certain norms, values and expected ways of doing things. At the same time, the pattern described equals a pattern changing its shape; by coining generalized values and expectations I admittedly overlook the variety of expressions these get in different forms, genres and ways of blogging, open publishing and ‘doing’ online journalism. As such, the principal components of a digital culture can be seen as those values and practices that people need in order to have the relative freedom to have and make an identity (Bauman, 2004: 84) and participate in ‘life politics’ (identity politics) (Giddens 1991: 209ff).

### **Online Journalism, Indymedia and Blogs**

Digital culture gets expressed in electronic or digital media that are so deeply embedded in everyday life that they disappear (Reeves and Nass, 1996; Papper, Holmes and Popovich, 2004). Lievrouw and Livingstone (2002) urge us to look at our ‘new media’ surroundings in terms of: “[t]he artifacts or devices that enable and extend our abilities to communicate; the communication activities or practices we engage in to develop and use these devices, and the social arrangements or organizations that form around the devices and practices” (online). Again, the relevance of such an approach to new media theory and the

study of social phenomena lies in the assumption, that humans and machines are implicated in one another, rather than one influencing or directing the other. Thus the popularity and corresponding commercialization of collaborative technologies at home and in the workplace (such as the ‘taking over’ of networked computers running multiple-user software, as problematized by Virilio, 1997), our constant engagement and disengagement in a wide variety of social networks (Wellman, 2002), and the lived experience in a global network society (Castells, 2005) should be seen as the discernable artefacts, activities and arrangements characterizing ‘new media’ or rather: *digital* culture.

In the context of these considerations, I see *Indymedia* to be a journalistic genre, serving as a platform for the production and dissemination of news and information. Yet it is also a form of participatory user-generated content or what has been called ‘we media’, as it allows anyone to post and upload files, information, and news without a formal editorial moderation or filtering process (Hyde, 2002; Bowman and Willis, 2003; Gillmor, 2004). *Indymedia* should be seen as a loosely organized set of social arrangements developing around the practices and ideals of open publishing and collaborative ‘non-hierarchical’ storytelling (Platon and Deuze, 2003). Yet its praxis is also tied into the roles and functions of so-called radical online journalism and alternative news – where ‘radical’ particularly refers to a kind of journalism where traditionally distinct roles of news producers and news consumers converge (Atton, 2004). As a form of alternative journalism—both online and offline—*Indymedia* remediates radical and oppositional media pre-dating the Web (Downing, 2001; Atton, 2002). In terms of the open publishing model of *Indymedia* online – wherein anyone can post messages, news and information without (formal) editorial filtering or intervention – any IMC site functions as a so-called ‘group weblog’. Walker (2003) offers a comprehensive definition of a weblog as: “[A] frequently updated website consisting of dated entries arranged in reverse chronological order so the most recent post appears first [...] Though weblogs are primarily textual, experimentation with sound, images, and videos has resulted in related genres such as photoblogs, videoblogs, and audioblogs [...] Most weblogs use links generously [...] Many weblogs allow readers to enter their own comments to individual posts (online).” Interestingly, weblogs and more specifically group weblogs have been considered to be quite similar to pirate radio stations of the 1970s and 1980s in that they broadcast unfiltered perspectives legitimized by their existence outside of, or in opposition to, mainstream news media corporations (Katz, 2000). Beyond similarities and roots in online and offline genres and structures, *Indymedia* must also be seen as an expression of the social phenomena mentioned above: individualization, post-nationalism and globalization. The 130+

*Indymedia* sites all over the world are enabled and maintained by individuals (sometimes operating in editorial collectives), at once connecting local issues and communities with global ones, manifesting themselves both as a particular community tied in with local interests (as different regions, cities or organizations each have their own version and interpretation of *Indymedia* up and running), and as a generic global ‘brand’, easily recognizable as such through its logo, the fact that various *Indymedia* collectives issue IMC press passes during demonstrations and events, as well as through the freely downloadable IMC source code (determining the ‘look’ and ‘feel’ of the site worldwide). Following Castells’ argument (2004) on the primacy of the space of flows in a global network society, *Indymedia* sites, activities, and activists are examples of the more or less simultaneous organization of social practices without geographical continuity – whereas the particular stories, events and people involved in IMC praxis are at the same organized based on locally specific interests.

Hall (2001) and Pavlik (2001) place news and journalism online in the social context of an evolving information society as typified by the dismantling of carefully cultivated hierarchical relationships between (mass) media consumers and producers. Hall for example emphasizes “the reciprocal links between news providers and readers” (2001: 25) in this ‘new’ online journalism environment, whereas Pavlik (2000: 234) boldly states how “technological change is fundamentally reshaping the relationships between and among news organizations, journalists and their many publics, including audiences, competitors, news sources, sponsors and those who seek to regulate or control the press.” Using examples such as the role of online information in reporting the Columbine high school killings and the Kosovo crisis in 1999, Hall goes on to suggest that online journalism is both more tied to (small) localities, and has a more global reach than ever before. In doing so, Hall closes the gap between *Indymedia* and journalism by implicitly referencing to an emerging digital culture within which global/local and producer/consumer distinctions become meaningless in favour of other qualified differences, such between open and closed participatory storytelling, or between the levels of interactivity offered (Deuze, 2003). The work of Atton (2004) and Neuberger (2004 and 2005) explicitly correlates blogging, open publishing and online journalism as expressions of a decentralized and plural Internet culture, in part typified by what Neuberger describes as different ‘institutional’ levels of media.

In this essay I discuss the building blocks of digital culture on the basis of contemporary discussions about (online) journalism, blogging and open publishing—all of which are combined in the structures, values and practices of *Indymedia*. As the basis of this argument I use a by no means exhaustive literature review, interviews with online journalists

and *Indymedia* activists across Europe, Australia and the United States between 1999 and 2002 (see: Deuze and Yeshua, 2001; Platon and Deuze, 2003; Deuze, Neuberger and Paulussen, 2004), and cross-national research among journalists in general, and about *Web*-based journalisms in particular (see: Deuze, 2002a, 2002b and 2003). In doing so, I assume that digital culture has emergent properties with roots both in online and offline phenomena, with links to trends and developments pre-dating the *World Wide Web*, yet at the same having an immediate impact felt all over the world through the widespread integration (of uses and applications) of Internet.

### **Digital Culture**

It is important to note that a sketch of characteristics common to a culture does not presuppose that all individuals located within that culture behave or act in similar ways, nor that a set of emerging practices is a linear progression from or improvement upon those that came before. What I do want to suggest however, is that the actions and behaviours of peoples within digital culture can be summarized into principal components, which one can use to study and understand the role of (new) media and journalisms in particular as these are appropriated by people and technologies worldwide. In other words: a digital culture does not imply that everyone is or sooner or later will be online and better for it, but assumes that in the ways humans and machines interact in the context of ever-increasing computerization and digitalisation of society an emerging digital culture is expressed. Such a culture thus has consequences on a shared social level – both online as well as offline. Digital culture has been conceptualized before, in particular by Manovich (2001), introducing the concept of an *information culture* as manifested in the convergence of media content and form, of national and cultural traditions, characters and sensibilities, as well as a mixing of culture and computers. In doing so, he extends earlier developments in new media theory towards an integrated perspective of ‘old’ and ‘new’ (such as in the work on remediation by Bolter and Grusin, 1999, and on ‘mediamorphosis’ by Fidler, 1997). This has consequences for the way we see and perceive the world around us. After travelling around the world, media historian Stephens (1998) signalled how edited image-based mediated reality was gaining over transmitted print-based reality. Both perspectives signal two mutually constitutive features of digital culture: **remediation** as in the remix of old and new media, and **bricolage** in terms of the highly personalized, continuous and more or less autonomous assembly, disassembly and re-assembly of mediated reality. Instead of relying on journalists, public relations managers,

politicians and other professional storytellers to make sense of our world, we seem to become quite comfortable in telling and distributing our own versions of those stories. In Rushkoff's words: "we begin to become aware of just how much of our reality is open source and up for discussion" (2003: 37). Although I am not sure whether this is a distinctly contemporary phenomenon, it is safe to argue that converging communication technologies like cell phones, wireless Internet and all kinds of plug-and-play devices facilitate and accelerate these practices.

The manifold scrambled, edited and converged ways in which we produce and consume information worldwide are gradually changing the way people interact, are interconnected, and give meaning to their lives. The emergence of a fragmented, edited yet connected and networked worldview in itself is part of digital culture, particularly as access to and increasing use of Internet and other computerized applications function as accelerators or amplifiers of a digital culture (Agre, 2002). As Wellman (2002: 11) argues, "complex social networks have always existed, but recent technological developments have afforded their emergence as a dominant form of social organization." This emerging arrangement of the social presupposes – next to a praxis of remediation and bricolage - a third significant type of activity, necessary for maintaining human agency in the context of the mentioned social context of individualization, post-nationalism and globalization: **participation**. Scholars of digital culture and – as their work more essentially pertains to Internet or the World Wide Web – *cyberculture* can be considered to be pointing at the same phenomenon: something is going on in the daily lives of media users worldwide that makes them (us) accept the fact that reality is constructed, assembled and manipulated by media, and that the only way to make sense of that mediated world is to intervene and thus adjust our worldview accordingly – which in turn shapes and renews the properties of media, more closely reflecting the identity of the remediating bricoleur instead of the proverbial couch potato. In short: in the proliferation and saturation of screen-based, networked and digital media proliferate and saturate our lives our reconstitution is expressed as:

1. active agents in the process of meaning-making (we become participants);
2. we adopt but at the same time modify, manipulate, and thus reform consensual ways of understanding reality (we engage in remediation);
3. we reflexively assemble our own particular versions of such reality (we are bricoleurs).

It is this process that is central to my thesis, and which in my mind defines digital culture. Digital culture is by no means only connected to or spawned by the convergence and

omnipresence of devices – we also reproduce it as our perceptions of reality (or perhaps: authenticity) are evolving. I see this digital culture as emerging from practices and communicative acts online and offline, shaping and being shaped by artefacts, arrangements and activities in ‘new’ and ‘old’ media which distinction becomes superfluous as all media are converging into the overall design of the computer – which according to the developers of the original desktop multimedia system in the early 1970s in itself is a ‘meta-medium’ that can be “all other media” (Kay and Goldberg 2000 [1977]: 176).

The principal components of digital culture can be caught in three concepts, which should be seen as articulated with each other: **participation**, **remediation**, and **bricolage**. On a side note I have to point out, that each of these elements may embody its own contradiction: with participation comes disconnection, remediation goes hand-in-hand with tradition, and bricolage finds its opposite in originality. These are not dichotomies, but must be seen as distinctions on a continuum, or as mutual constitutive parts of a whole.

*Participation.* Considering the concerns of an increasingly fragmented society and a general decline in traditional social capital as defined by people’s trust and in politics, institutions such as church and state, and to some extent others (see Putnam, 2004 for an global overview), it may be counter-intuitive to claim that a more engaged and participatory culture is emerging. Norris (2001) has documented how Putnam’s claims—in particular regarding the relationship between media use, new information and communication technologies and civic engagement—are not supported by international data. Several authors have questioned Putnam’s rather narrowly defined and gender-blind framework for looking at what constitutes ‘social capital’—such as the reported decline in mainstream church going. My criticism of Putnam is that he implicitly conflates civic engagement with social cohesion and the quest for an “absence of difference” (Bauman, 2000: 99-100), whereas a contemporary understanding of participation must explicitly acknowledge a notion of ‘hypersociability’, where the social consists of networked individualism “enhancing the capacity of individuals to rebuild structures of sociability from the bottom up” (Castells, 2001: 132).

A broadly defined concept of participation in contemporary society reveals a much richer palette than what Putnam seems to be willing to admit—and this brings us back to the realm of digital media and its participatory peer culture. Ever since the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century so-called ‘alternative’ media have more or less successfully emerged next to, and sometimes in symbiotic relationships with other forms of community media (Atton, 2001). One could think

of pirate radio stations, small-scale print magazines, local newspapers and radio stations, since the 1980s community-based Bulletin Board Systems (BBS) and Usenet newsgroups on Internet, and later on a wide range of genres on the Web such as community portal sites, group weblogs, voluntary news services, and so on. Participation must be seen as a defining principle of digital culture with the emergence of Independent Media Centres, as their commitment to open publishing (anyone can post or upload content to the website), online and offline collaborative media production (producing websites, print newsletters, audio and video), and open-sourcing decision-making processes (made available through publicly accessible mailing lists and chat channels) shows. What scholars of alternative (Atton, 2001) and citizens' media (Rodriguez, 2001) have not considered but that should be mentioned in the context of this essay, is the fact that much of this community-oriented and sometimes participatory media-making takes place within the walls of mainstream media organizations. Jenkins (2006) work in particular shows how commercial corporations at least in part must be seen as co-conspirators in the emergence of a participatory media culture, from *Star Wars*' George Lucas encouraging fan movies to the producers of reality TV show *Survivor* actively participating in so-called 'spoiler' discussion forums online. The level of participatory production within the media system has slowly increased throughout the last century, although a more interactive or 'dialogical' perception of media work is still problematic for industry professionals (Deuze, 2005). Some industry observers have called on mainstream journalism to prepare itself for an upcoming era of participatory news and 'we media', as writers like Gillmor (2004) predict it: "[n]ews evolves into collaborative, a participatory activity. Everyone is a journalist, or can be. Peer-to-peer news will eclipse business-to-consumer news" (online). According to the American Press Institute, "to stay afloat, media companies must reimagine storytelling forms to vie for consumer attention [...] and they must react to the consumer's creation of content with awe and respect" (2005: 3). Jenkins (2004: 93) calls this shift towards a more inclusive production process 'cultural convergence', fostering "a new participatory folk culture by giving average people the tools to archive, annotate, appropriate and recirculate content. Shrewd companies tap this culture to foster consumer loyalty and generate low-cost content." As an example of this one could consider the announcement by News Corp CEO Rupert Murdoch in April 2005 to start including bloggers to the websites of his news organizations: "our Internet site will have to do still more to be competitive. For some, it may have to become the place for conversation [...] We need to be the destination for those bloggers" (online).

Participation also has a political dimension, as it ties in with a shift in the identity of citizens in Western elective democracies from a rather passive ‘informed’ citizenry to a rights-based, monitorial and voluntarist citizenry (Schudson, 1995; Hartley, 1996). This shift, occurring from the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century to the early 21<sup>st</sup> century as for example Schudson (1998) and Norris (2001) document, entails a notion of citizens who have become increasingly willing and able to voice their concerns and claim their place in society – but do so (and often only) whenever they feel their personal (including familial, communal, and sometimes regional or global single-issue) interests are at stake. In this context Wellman signals a shift in the 20<sup>th</sup> century from group to glocalized relationships at work and in the community, defining this ‘glocalization’ as “the combination of intense local and extensive global interaction” (2002: 11). Participation as a core element of the currently emerging digital culture also has its roots in ‘DIY’ (Do-It-Yourself) culture, particularly flourishing during the 1990s, with people increasingly claiming the right to be heard rather than be spoken to – such as is the case of the traditional mass media broadcasting model. Hartley (1999) describes how this kind of self-righteous ‘DIY citizenship’ as opposed to a model of cultural citizenship corresponding with the era of mass media now also incorporates notions of mutuality, solidarity, interactivity, and the freedom to choose affiliations. It is tempting to claim people in contemporary (Western) capitalist democracies have become apathetic and complacent consumers hell-bent on shopping and watching reality television, celebrity news or soap operas next to retreating into their own narrowly defined media spaces if a narrow definition of social capital and civic engagement is used. In a broader sense of this argument, it seems clear that people not only have come to expect participation from the media, they increasingly have found ways to enact this participation in the multiple ways they use and make media. Like with so many other social developments, the Internet can be seen as an amplifier of this trend. The Internet must be understood in terms of the complex social networks it resembles in its infrastructure and use, and thus how Internet itself is neither a historically inevitable or fixed medium, just like communities, networks, or identities are not (for example: compare Hall, 1997 on ‘old’ and ‘new’ identities and ethnicities with Thomas and Wyatt, 1999 on previous and ongoing patterns of design and use of Internet).

This increasingly participatory culture translates itself in the widespread proliferation of networked computers and Internet connections in the home (and increasingly to handheld mobile devices). Recognition of this culture of participatory authorship has come from software developers where they have introduced the concept of ‘open’ design. An advanced form of this type of design is the Open Source Movement, based on the principle of shared

and collaborative access to and control over software, and using (or rather: tweaking) it to improve the product individually for global use. The videogame industry has – since the early 1990s – long acknowledged the necessity of viral marketing and user control in product development by pre-releasing game source code, offering games versions as shareware, and tapping fan communities for input. This necessity of user-participation in product-development and productivity has also been acknowledged in the realms of marketing, management, news media, and all kinds of other sectors of the economy (Bar and Riis, 2001; Bowman and Willis, 2003; Von Hippel, 2005). Indeed, participation as a meaning-making value has specific Internet exponents, especially exemplified by individual and collaborative weblogging. Dunlop summarizes how weblogs have political and cultural dimensions, indeed also affecting our understanding of democracy, journalism, and other more or less nation-based expert systems in society: “To some people, weblogs (blogs, as the word is almost universally abbreviated to) are a geek hula-hoop, a fad that will pass once the novelty wears off; a bit of fun, but not something to get too excited about. To others they represent a rebirth of participatory democracy, a new form of journalism, and even the home of the new public intellectuals” (2003).

Participation, not in the least enabled and amplified by the real-time connectedness of Internet and however voluntarist, incoherent, and perhaps solely fuelled by private interests is a principal component of digital culture. I am not claiming this is ‘good’ or a progression from other ways of circulating and producing meaning – but I do feel a sense of participation is what people have come to expect from those aspects of society they wish to engage in.

*Remediation.* In their work on remediation Bolter and Grusin (1999) argue how every new medium refashions yet also reproduces older media, whereas old media refashion themselves to answer the challenges of new media. To their lucid analysis I would like to add an element of distantiation inherent in all contemporary refashioning practices. Distantiation can be understood to mean a manipulation of the dominant way of doing or understanding things in order to juxtapose, challenge or even subvert the mainstream. In the context of my argument here it is important to critique the supposed deliberate nature of distantiation; what people do or expect from each other as they engage with digital media is primarily inspired by private interests, and not necessarily an expression of radical, alternative, critical or activist sentiments. On a societal level distantiation for example can be seen to manifest itself as ‘hyperindividualization’ – the extreme fragmentation of contemporary society into private public spheres within which we only talk to and with ourselves. In the context of digital

culture distantiation gets expressed in the personalization offered (and demanded) of Web browsers, E-mail applications, and other types of so-called ‘user-friendly’ software. Such individualization is considered to be a particular feature of the gradual (and structurally incomplete) transition from industrial to network societies in capitalist democracies around the world, as Bauman concludes: “the way individual people define individually their individual problems and try to tackle them deploying individual skills and resources is the sole remaining ‘public issue’ and the sole object of ‘public interest’” (2000: 72). In this context distantiation refers both to an inevitable social trend – individualization – as to a more or less deliberate social act – deconstructing and/or subverting symbols, images and other mediated products of whatever is perceived as ‘mainstream’. This suggests that digital culture can be partly characterized by the distantiation of the individual from society coupled with a remediation of old media by new media (artefacts, activities and social arrangements).

In terms of digital culture it makes sense to look at some of the most successful online applications for everyday individual use – of which weblogs and the various ways in which these are redistributed are an excellent example. Mortensen and Walker (2002: 267-8) opt that “blogs encourage a feeling of time”, in that on weblogs posts are arranged chronologically, “determined by the time of thinking.” Weblogs are considered to be more similar to the way we think and act in everyday life – behaviours which can be typified by a paradox between inconsistency and chronology – than for example the kind of narrative offered through newspapers or broadcast newscasts – functioning on the basis of (patterned) selectivity and linearity. Indeed, if anything, bloggers define what they do as more or less similar to journalism, but consider their personal voice and opinionated to be of added value, and they feel this sets them apart from the news media (Neuberger, 2004). Yet at the same time most of the content bloggers focusing on news and information link to or comment stems comes from mainstream mass media corporations. Thus bloggers tend to do what they do in personal distantiation from what journalists do, while remediating some of journalism’s peculiar strategies, techniques, and even content (Lasica, 2001). The same goes for oppositional media in general and online alternative media in particular (Eliasoph, 1988; Platon and Deuze, 2003).

The discussion on whether blogging can or should be considered a form of journalism – and whether journalists should be(come) bloggers – is alive and well on the Web and in some the literature (Lasica, 2001; Rosen, 2005). In a discussion piece in the *Online Journalism Review* (09/24/2002) Gillmor is quoted as claiming: “Weblogs are certainly part of the process that adds up to journalism. I’m talking about the trend of do-it-yourself

journalism. We think of journalism in terms of this late 20<sup>th</sup> century model of mass media, where gatekeepers gather news from sources and send it out to readers [...] There's this blurring of lines and I don't know where it's going to come out, but I do know that something major is going on that is bringing journalism from the top down and the bottom up." Here, Gillmor connects the emergence of DIY culture with relatively new kinds of journalism as well as with the signalled trend towards accelerated individualization. In the same piece, journalist Paul Andrews implicitly addresses the relationship between participatory media, journalism, and distantiation: "A new style of journalism, based on a 'raw feed' directly from the source, is emerging. Journalists testing the new waters are bound to wreak havoc on institutionalized media." If blogging – and *Indymedia* can be considered to be an example of an oppositional group weblog – in some ways is a subversion of the mainstream institutionalized media approach to news, it also builds on a long tradition of alternative media, as well as so-called citizen's media based on communication, dialogue and self-empowerment within certain communities (Rodriguez, 2001). In pre-Web times the popularity of such media — or rather the increasing unpopularity of mainstream corporate media — has been embraced by parts of the news industry, adopting the techniques and strategies of so-called public or civic journalism – a movement emerging during the late 1980s (Rosen, 1999). As defined by pundits, public journalism has two prime goals: one is making news organizations listen more closely to their audiences, and two: making news organisations play more active roles in their communities (Merrit, 1995). At the core of this argument rests a normative assumption that in order for journalism to survive into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, participation should be embraced over detachment. Although this does tie in with the cultural importance of participation as discussed earlier in this essay, it must be noted that the popularity of participatory forms of journalism can at least in part be explained by the fact that these run counter to what institutionalized media traditionally offer. Heikkilä and Kunelius (2002) suggest the popularity of such 'dialogical' types of journalism can be explained by "the failure of mainstream serious journalism to address the experiences of people in a meaningful way" (online). What is important for my argument here is the interconnectedness of distantiation, remediation, blogging, *Indymedia*, and journalism as an expression of digital culture.

Remediation can be countered by tradition, where tradition can be seen as the perceived safety or sense of security in sameness, similarity, routines, and deeply entrenched patterns of organization. This notion becomes visible through the increasing problematization (by politicians and journalists alike) of the inevitable by-products of globalization: like

worldwide migration, resistant social movements (a.k.a.: freedom fighters or terrorists), popular consumer culture, and displacement of labour. In terms of media it takes shape of passionate attacks against the perceived dumbing down or social isolation effects of screen-based media like computers and televisions (see for example the work of Neil Postman). But this is just one way of interpreting remediation dialectically. The examples I have used to discuss remediation in the context of digital culture also show that it does not necessarily mean different from, or in radical opposition to, the mainstream or dominant ways of doing things, but rather as an expression of a distinctly private enactment of human agency in the face of omnipresent computer-mediated reality. In other words: public journalism is still very much practiced within the context of corporate news media organizations; group weblogs are most definitely based on consensual ethical behaviour ('Netiquette') and journalistic quality principles (such as authority, legitimacy, and credibility); *Indymedia* websites are maintained and sometimes edited, filtered or otherwise managed through processes of decision-making that evolve quite similar to those in the average corporate newsroom (Schudson, 1999b; Matheson, 2004; Platon and Deuze, 2003). Remediation and distantiation in digital culture perhaps means being deeply immersed in the system while at the same time attributing legitimacy and credibility to a self-definition of working against or outside of the system, as well as reforming the system from within. Seen as such, I am interested in the ways in which participation and remediation are sustained and developed over time by individual people in everyday life – and particularly by people involved in and affected by news media. If participation and remediation are key concepts in digital culture, how do people recognize each other as such, attribute quality and legitimacy to their actions, and what is different about media production and consumption in a digital, rather than a print, visual or information culture? For now, a possible answer refers to a third principal component of digital culture: bricolage.

*Bricolage*. Hartley (2002: 22ff), referring to Lévi-Strauss, defines bricolage as “the creation of objects with materials to hand, re-using existing artefacts and incorporating bits and pieces.” According to Hartley, bricolage incorporates practices and notions like borrowing, hybridity, mixture, and plagiarism. Most scholars in media and cultural studies invoke bricolage when describing the remixing, reconstructing and re-using of separate artefacts, actions, ideas, signs, symbols and styles in order to create new insights or meanings. Originality, or a modernist emphasis on ‘first things’ as an emblem of quality is thrown out of the window in favour of an attitude that prefers an assemblage and tweaking of multiple good

copies over a single bad original. The open source movement, the release of Software Development Kits (SDKs) by game software companies, the collective writing and editing of news, books, games, research paper and all other kinds of content co-creation using 'Wiki'-based software applications are all examples of a liquid modern interpretation of originality. The international resistance against the efforts of the publishing, recording and distributing industries to defend the copyrights of their materials is a good example of a phenomenon that is tied in with bricolage as the legitimate way of doing things in today's emerging digital culture. Open file exchange across peer-to-peer (P2P) networks is privileged over acquiring the original products of the industry at the counters of the overpriced corporate 'megastore'. Bricolage plays an important role in the realm of politics and political citizenship, as although people may recognize 'Left' from 'Right' and 'Progressive' from 'Conservative', they also experience problems when having to identify themselves (as voters) exclusively with a single party or ideology. As Giddens (1991: 209ff) has argued, today we are immersed in our highly personal 'life politics' – another building block the individualized society – through which the multiple private and public spheres we (assume we) belong to get meaning. Those meanings are not necessary consistent, nor are our convictions implicitly rational and deliberate. The bricoleur-citizen identifies with many issues, choices and lifestyles before voting or enacting some other kind of civic or otherwise emancipatory engagement.

On the World Wide Web bricolage is evident in the ways in which we click, publish and link our way online. Chandler (1998) applies bricolage in a textual analysis of personal Homepages: "[e]specially in a virtual medium one may reselect and rearrange elements until a pattern emerges which seems to satisfy the constraints of the task and the current purposes of the user. Indeed, no version of the resulting text need be regarded as final – completion may be endlessly deferred in the medium in which everything is always 'under construction'" (online). In (online) journalism bricolage and remediation are expressed in the practice of shovelware: the repurposing or windowing of content across different sites, media, and thus (potential) audiences. Online or in the settings of converged multimedia news operations, journalists re-use and re-distribute edited and otherwise manipulated versions of content originally produced for other media (Deuze, 2004). News sites generally offer repurposed or aggregated content that was previously produced and used in other media, such as audio and video clips, still image galleries, logos and icons, bits and pieces of written text. When online journalists acknowledge their sources and offer internal or external hyperlinks to a vast array of materials, documents, related stories, archival content, and other sites, they attribute an active bricoleur-identity to their users as they give people a chance to find their own way

through the information at hand. *Indymedia* websites are also a good example of this practice, as *Indymedia* sites tend to offer a wide array of links to topics, sources (sometimes including audio and video), issues and places all over the world. A similar argument can be made for the way bloggers construct their narratives, eclectically linking to each other and to content found while surfing the Web, while adding private musings, opinions and analyses in terms of Baudrillard's "second-hand truth, objectivity and authenticity" (1998 [1981]: 174).

To the average journalist or politician this seemingly chaotic, disorganized and random display and practice of online information poses clear challenges to determining what credible information is, or how to break through the clutter in order to prevent information overload. Credible and manageable or not: this is the way people behave online (and increasingly offline as well: constantly scanning, zapping, browsing, switching and now multitasking between and within different media types, genres and formats; see for example Papper, Holmes and Popovich, 2004).

Digital culture consists of the practices and beliefs of the bricoleur – whose activities should not be confused with boundless freedom and endless creativity, however: "The bricoleur's strategies are constrained not only by pragmatic considerations such as suitability-to-purpose and readiness-to-hand but by the experience and competence of the individual in selecting and using 'appropriate' materials" (Chandler, 1998, online). Here we can also observe how bricolage simultaneously consists of repurposing and refashioning the old while using and making the new. Again, bricolage as an emerging practice can be considered to be a principal component of digital culture, as well as an accelerating agent of it.

The question is how this particular understanding of digital culture helps us to understand the relevance of identifying and studying phenomena like *Indymedia*. First of all, I think we have to acknowledge our society to be one that is functionally differentiated to the extent that we rely on an endless number of other people or groups in society to survive. In pre-modern times such people would live next door, or in the castle close to our farm. Today, these people can be working in factories or call centres on the other side of the planet, yet our interdependency has only accelerated. If my analysis of digital culture as a set of elements, practices and values emerging all over the world – and in particular among the peoples of wired societies – is correct, a ripple effect can be expected to all subsystems, groups and people. Understanding the properties of a single social phenomenon like the open publishing enacted by *Indymedia*, or the praxis of group and individual bloggers and (radical) online

journalism thus may contribute to recognizing subtle shifts in connected complex social systems like politics, economy, and the “creative industries” (Uricchio, 2004).

My argument therefore maintains that digital culture is created, reproduced, sustained and recognized throughout these social systems. What is amazing about a digital culture - rather than a print, visual or information culture – is that it fosters community while at the same time can be fuelled by isolation. In other words: we can be (or feel) connected to everyone else within the system – for example through chatrooms, instant messaging, group weblogs, Trackback systems and RSS feeds on individual weblogs, Usenet discussion groups, Bulletin Boards Systems, social software (like *Friendster* or *Orkut*), P2P networks, SMS-TV, and so on – while at the same time being isolated as individuals sitting at a desk in front of a screen-based medium at home, at the office, in a public library or Internet café. Yet digital culture is not self-created and self-maintained through connected devices and access alone – it also has self-referential properties in that certain values, beliefs and practices are preferred over others. A good example is the emergence of a ‘Netiquette’ as an evolving set of ethical guidelines for communicating and publishing online. These values are sometimes formulated in opposition to those upheld by mainstream corporate media: preferring the personal experiential account rather than professional detached observation, heralding openness for all rather than access based on expertise claimed on the basis of institutional authority, attributing more weight to providing a bottom-up platform for individual voices instead of top-down delivering of messages based on a ‘mass’-based perception of the common denominator. Again we must realize that such values have not sprung into existence when the first BBS went online. What has happened, though, is an acceleration of acceptance of these values through the ongoing proliferation of Internet access and usage, and a corresponding process of infusing disparate social systems like oppositional social movements and professional journalism, inspiring the emergence of Indymedia and participatory news. Digital culture, in other words, can be characterized by participation, remediation and bricolage as its key elements, sustained through ongoing self-production which gets expressed particularly in online (blogging, *Indymedia*, radical online journalism) phenomena.

## **Conclusion**

There are particular consequences for scholarly work in the field of digital culture, whether studying phenomena exclusive to cybersociety or not. The relevance of articulating the principal components of digital culture could be that contemporary trends and

developments in multiple related social systems can be studied and analyzed using the same framework. Let me briefly address this issue by looking at the media profession primarily implicated in this essay, journalism. Everywhere in the news media one can see how journalists are trying to come to terms with their roles as gatekeepers, content managers and facilitators of connectivity. Indeed, new types of dialogical or interactive journalism are emerging next to existing models of hierarchical, top-down storytelling based on a perception of ‘telling people what they need to know’. Participation as a value and expectation of mainstream journalism was first established through functions like newspaper ombudsmen and reader representatives that became an accepted part of newsroom organizations worldwide - starting in Japan and Sweden early 20<sup>th</sup> century, in the 1960s in the U.S. and expanding there in the 1980s, during the 1990s in The Netherlands and elsewhere in Europe (Van Dalen and Deuze, 2005). In television news participation is moderately embraced through opinion polls (collected via phone-ins, SMS messages or as click-throughs at the program website). Yet online, participation goes farthest, as media corporations move towards what has been called ‘citizen journalism’ websites, combining editorial filtering with user-generated content, such as in the case of *Blufftoday.com* in the U.S. or *Nieuwslokaal.net* in The Netherlands. Weblogs have also been co-opted by news organizations as varied as *Le Monde* in France and the *Mail & Guardian* in South Africa, offering moderated blogspace online to their readers. These examples suggest an exponential increase in the level of participation generated by and expressed in the professional news media system. Coupled with earlier mentioned practices like the repurposing of content (both online and offline), deep-linking, scanning, zapping and other examples of random user access to content combined with database-driven production routines, it is possible to understand this using the concepts of remediation and bricolage – both from a producer and a consumer point of view. An important point must be made regarding the historicity of these trends: none of this is ‘new’, yet the contemporary condition of participation, bricolage and remediation in the way people use and make news media can be seen as a supercharged version of that which came before. Even though such techniques essentially still maintain the operational closure of the professional journalistic system, the examples show how journalists in their current work are more or less explicitly trying to give meaning to digital culture. If we would consider other social systems, such as politics and the economy, the major contemporary trends there can for example be considered to be expressions of bricolage, distantiation, and participation. In politics one can for example observe changing notions of citizenship and civic engagement, where party membership and voter loyalty are a thing of the past; in economics: changing

notions of consumerism, signified by a shift towards a ‘pay-per-use’ world (Cisneros, 2000) and an ‘age of access’ (Rifkin, 2001), as ownership and brand loyalty are slowly disappearing.

The digital culture described in this essay does not replace other media cultures. First, cultures exist side by side, partly overlap, and certain values mean different things within different media cultures as for example bricolage in electronic media can mean zapping (TV) and scanning (radio), whereas in digital culture it can refer to aggregating second-hand truths through deep-linking. Second, the moment one names and defines a culture, it has already become something else. There is no such thing as ‘the’ digital culture, as having culture means making culture, following Baumann’s assumption that “culture is two things at once, that is, a dual discursive construction” (1999: 95). My principal component analysis thus both reifies digital culture as well as argues for a processual remaking of it, in that it acknowledges the identified components as contingent trends rather than as a definitive set of characteristics. This will have consequences for the way we work, communicate, and give meaning to our lives. The current higher and upper middle class in the world is once local and global, individualized and interconnected; consists of both citizens and netizens. Some of the most pressing debates of today – about authenticity and originality, self-determination and social cohesion, equity, equality, and identity – are already influenced by this emerging global cultural system. Social systems in society are feeling the impact of this emerging cultural consensus as well – especially the traditional institutions of modernity: parliamentary democracy and corporate journalism. With a discussion set against the backdrop of blogging, *Indymedia* and (radical) online journalism I have aimed to synthesize the core elements of digital culture with often-voiced concerns regarding the individualization and globalization of contemporary post-national society in order to show the emergence of new types of citizenship, participation, activism, dialogue and interactive communication.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Let me briefly state how I define and understand ‘culture’ in the context of this essay. Throughout the literature I draw on for my essay, culture as a concept is used interchangeably with other units of analysis, such as in the ways social systems sustain and reproduce themselves through communication (Luhmann, 1990). I thus see culture as more or less a set of values, norms, practices and expectations shared (and constantly renegotiated) of a group of people. In this essay, these ‘people’ are those inhabitants of modern societies most directly affected by computerization, such as in going online regularly during the week at home or from work (for example: according to *Nielsen/NetRatings*, per August 1, 2005 this would refer

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to over 260 million Americans, roughly 30 million Japanese residents, about 12 million Brazilians and over 10 million Spanish people). In some ways this group of people represents a distinct elite culture – especially with regard to those people in the world who have yet to make their first phone call or plug in their first radio. On the other hand, drawing a boundary between those surfing the Web and those who do not ignores the spill-over between online and offline activities. The fact that some people only read news online while others subscribe to a newspaper does not necessarily mean they live ‘in’ different cultures. Indeed, in this essay I argue how digital culture is both a social phenomenon and a set of values and activities observable online, but also having distinct offline properties and expressions. In terms of contemporary social theorists of globalization – such as Giddens and Beck – I would opt for the hypothesis that ‘no one is outside anymore’; whether outside of the globalized world or digital culture. Following Baumann, I understand digital culture both as “the collective heritage of a group, that is, as a catalog of ideas and practices that shape both the collective and the individual lives and thoughts of all members” (2001: 25) as well as something that “only exists in the act of being performed, and it can never stand still or repeat itself without changing its meaning” (2001: 26). This recombinant relationship between what Baumann calls an essentialist and a processual understanding of culture guides my way of thinking in this paper.

<sup>2</sup> See: Deuze (1999 and 2005).

<sup>3</sup> See: Platon and Deuze (2003).

<sup>4</sup> See: Deuze (2003).

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