New media has changed our world. It has broadened our means of communication and allowed us to connect with people across spaces and time in unprecedented ways. For collective action such as activism, this has meant monumental shifts in the ways we can organize around shared goals. As recent events have demonstrated, new media activism can harness masses of people to bring about incredible societal change more easily than ever before. From the accomplishments of the so-called Arab Spring, to the Occupy Wall Street movement, to the smaller scale culture jam’s of American Apparel’s plus size model campaign; People can be seen or heard online as well as on the streets with the help of these tools.

At this stage much of the literature around new media activism aims to describe it and tell the stories of its importance in recent world events. Other literature wants to define what it is, its scope and effect as well as help shape it’s hoped for future directions. A critical piece is emerging as to who and how it is operated, for whom and in what way including some consideration of who is being excluded. It considers new media activism as an online space, an offline space, as well as an interface. Additionally, some theorists want to warn fellow activists of the perils of new media organizing about the ability for anyone to harness it’s power and the transparency, yet also contradictory opacity, and easy documentation of organizing online. Some of this has led to an activist ‘how to’ discussion with authors citing the best methods of organizing. There is also a more esoteric conversation at work that discusses the more philosophical implications of these new ways of being together as a community and in society.

The following pieces touch on all these subjects. The literature review that follows begins with a discussion of the emerging self-awareness and reflexivity of new media activism. In this first section, Heather McMullen argues that by asking questions about what it is, what it isn’t, who participates, and who is excluded, the field is beginning to carve out its own identity.

The second and third sections explore current discussions of the manifestations of new media activism. First, Sonja Hohenbild provides us with a critical discussion of the subversive, aesthetic interventions of Tactical Media – a form of activism that originated in the offline space of the Situationist movement, and which has continually reinvented itself in the transition from Web 1.0 to 2.0. Next, Shahriar Khonsari looks at activism in the socially networked world of Web 2.0 in his nuanced discussion flash mobs.

Finally, Kalea Turner-Beckman’s discussion of online surveillance and the Internet protection movement looks at some of the legal consequences of online organizing, and the innovative solutions that are emerging from the hacktivist community.

What is apparent is that new media, its discourses, and analyses are in constant transformation.
New Media Activism – Coming of Age

The emergence of technologies summarized as new media undoubtedly provides new means of activism for the world’s people. It remains a question as to whether or not we will ever see again a mass movement that does not have new media activism components. The gathering of examples, insights and events has given media analysts almost unmanageable amounts to consider. New media activism is coming of age, with a large body of literature that attempts to bring about a form of self-awareness to this medium. Activists are grappling with critical queries about who creates, engages with and controls even alternative media spaces. A portion of the literature tries to define what is and isn’t new media activism, its goals, manifestations and identity. This has likely been a processual reality for most media and is not surprisingly taking place in such a ‘living’ and current medium with ever increasing power on the world stage. I will now go on to discuss some aspects of this reflection.

Mode of Operation: The ‘How shall we do it’

Some theorists and activists who are both analysts of media movements as well as producers of alternative media are at a vantage point to discuss the transformation of new media over time and are in many ways attempting to steer the direction of new media activist efforts.

The most predominant writer on such subjects may be Geert Lovink. Lovink’s body of work includes articles such as ‘Mapping the Limits of New Media’, ‘A virtual
world is possible’ and other contextualizing pieces. In many of his interviews with other important new media thinkers and activists, questions are raised about how much to challenge the mainstream media, or the relevance of the fact that much online organizing is centered around offline events and if this relegates new media activism to eventism. (Lovink, 2002) Much of his work describes the history and origin of the movement with discussion of what he believes to be its anti-globalization roots. There has also been production of glossaries to assist in understanding the complex technology and language of new media activism. (RAQS, 2003)

Who’s Activism is New Media Activism?

Some literature challenges the idea that new media is as inclusive as it claims. Questions of who produces such media, has access to the required tools, the literacy and perhaps the confidence to engage with it as well as the resources to be sustainably involved is queried. AudienceScapes, an African development brief discusses the actual participation of women in less developed settings in new media technologies, challenging commonly held views about the liberating capacities of new media for women with less access. (Bowen, 2010) Worth noting however, is that this same media is what houses AudienceScapes and the problematizing conversation. Such issues are also queried by Geertsema in her analysis of Gender Links in South Africa. (Geertsema, 2010) Academics have begun to discuss what new media might mean for women in the Arab world with a number of events and conferences in the past years. Such as ‘SMS Women and Social Activism in the New Media Era’ and ‘Women and the New Media in the Mediterranean’ event held this past summer. While on the one hand, new media organizing promises abilities to go beyond common stereotypes and prejudices due to the lack of ability to know who one is organising with, it also falls victim to common critiques of access and participation resulting in a negotiation of power and participation even in this inherently more democratic form of media.

To What Effect? For What?

Lovink argues that despite the enormous potential of new media, society has changed very little: “Societies adapt to ICT’s but do not change in a fundamental way and prove remarkably flexible in staying as they are.” (Lovink, 2007: 19) To a degree, Rosalind Gill and Margaretha Geertsema might agree as while the potential and veneer exists for new medias to be more inclusive of women as producers of media, this remains an unfulfilled possibility. Others yet discuss the realm merits of ‘clicktivism’ such as the numerous online petitions. (Mostatabi, 2011) Certainly the discussion of where even new media activism regarding developing countries is taking place could propose the same early conclusion as much of this online organizing and buzz is being done, in a sense, on behalf of developing countries from higher resource settings. Bound to emerge is a body of literature attempting to
measure the impact of new media activism and analyzing what these exciting new means of organizing have in fact achieved.

Tactical Media: on the (esoteric) edge of online and offline space?

“Tactical media are media of crisis, criticism and opposition. This is both the source of their power, (”anger is an energy : John Lydon), and also their limitation. Their typical heroes [and heroine's!] are; the activist, Nomadic media warriors, the prankster, the hacker, the street rapper, the camcorder kamikaze, they are the happy negatives, always in search of an enemy.” (Garcia & Lovink, 1997)

It is nearly impossible to approach a literature review of Tactical Media in a critical way, as it looks as if all of the literature agrees that Tactical Media is thoroughly positive. And because of Tactical Media’s volatile definition, resistant per se, the quote above is the most critical I found.

Sometimes these texts sounded to me like esoteric ‘bibles’, all quoting the same authors. Firstly Michel de Certeau, then Geert Lovink and the ‘stars’ of the scene: activist artist-collectives like autonome a.f.r.i.k.a. gruppe, Ubermorgen, Critical Art Ensemble, @™ark, and The Yes Men – all of which could be described as coming from the Situationist movement and communication guerrilla.

It felt especially esoteric to me after having read The ABC of Tactical Media by David Garcia and Geert Lovink (1997), Tactical Media by Rita Raley2 (2009), dozens (!) of articles,

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1 Even though the typical hacker is still imagined as male, there is a huge impact made by women in cyberspace, see also Donna Haraway at al. I use the underscore to point out that there are more possibilities than the language suggests – in this case, more possibilities than the male/female binary.

2 I find it amazing that even though the mimicry tactics of the cover of Rita Raley’s book are obvious, I am still disappointed that I cannot click and see a film. Image from: http://www.upress.umn.edu/book-division/books/tactical-media
and, finally, *The Space of Tactical Media* by Alesandra Renzi (2008). In particular, I take issue with Renzi’s abbreviation of Tactical Media as ‘TM’, as I believe that the poetics, sounds, and figures of a text are instrumental in its meaning.³

Nevertheless, I find Tactical Media to be a compelling practice because of the space that it opens, both online and offline, for subversive and aesthetic actions. The discussion here is not about whether offline-activism is safer than online-activism, or if ICTs are over fetishized (such as the so-called Facebook or Twitter revolutions, or ICT4D) – there is already a conscious understanding of these issues in the literature. The strength of Tactical Media is that it doesn’t strive to be perfect, high-tech, or efficient; but accepts its place as a provisional medium, celebrating its flexibility to jump from online to offline space, from one tool to another, from one topic to another. Even the old controversy between arts and politics seems to disperse, leading us to a *deteritorialization* (Deleuze & Guattari, 1980) of thought, space, and agency.

Michel de Certeau’s discussion of tactics in ‘The Practice of Everyday Life’ (1984) has greatly influenced the literature on Tactical Media. De Certeau’s discussion of ‘tactics’ as a counterpart of ‘strategies’, and as the means of the ‘weak’ against the system of the ‘strong’ (de Certeau, 1984: xix), is taken as the starting point in much of the literature.

The literature is not focused so much on whether the ‘media is the message’ or whether it is a ‘mere’ organizational tool; Rather, it discusses Tactical Media as a habitual art-term, as the material with which the non-traditional art/activist collectives work. The difference between Tactical Media and more traditional revolutionary strategies is that, in the sense of de Certeau, the tactics cannot be applied from an imagined outside, but acknowledge that, after Theodor W. Adorno, there is no outside in a (capitalist) society – “There is no right life in a false one.” (1951: 42)⁴

In the context of (new) media activism, Tactical Media operates in online and offline space, as well as the interface between the two. The star of Tactical Media is the person/collective, the activist – the “cyborg”

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³ In this case, I continually associated “TM” with Transcendental Meditation, which is nowadays an esoteric trademark (TM!) itself. Furthermore, practitioners or theorists of TM (Transcendental Meditation) repeat the same words and phrases to promote the positive impacts of TM – something that I find to be true in the literature about Tactical Media as well.

⁴ “Es gibt kein richtiges Leben im falschen.” Translated from the German by the author in preference of the more common translation: “There is no way of living a false life correctly”.
(Haraway, 1991) – who tries to beat the enemy at their own game, with their own weapons. The culture jamming and cloning of corporate webpages, or The Yes Men’s impersonation of a Dow Chemical spokesman on the BBC (Bhopal Disaster; n.d.) are perfect examples.

“Tactical Media are never perfect, always in becoming, performative and pragmatic, involved in a continual process of questioning the premises of the channels they work with. This requires the confidence that the content can survive intact as it travels from interface to interface. But we must never forget that hybrid media has its opposite nemesis, the MedialeGesamtkunstwerk. The final program for the electronic Bauhaus.” (Garcia & Lovink, 1997)

In these discussions of Tactical Media, it seems, there are no answers, but only more questions and open ends.

Flash Mobs: Political Weapons for Serious Fun

“[...]our purpose is manipulation - the persuasion of a large number of people to act, feel, think, know in certain ways – the convenient formula will be that of the masses.” (Raymond Williams, as quoted in Fuchs, 2011)
Nowadays, using social websites to promote social movements is an accepted reality. Many activists use these websites to organize events and spread information, and governments are becoming more aware of these kinds of activities on social websites like Facebook and YouTube. In his discussion of the UK riots that took place in August of this year, Christopher Fuchs writes: 

“... the BBC took up the social media panic discourse on August 9th and reported about the power of social media to bring together not only five, but 200 people for forming a rioting "mob". Media and politicians created the impression that the riots were orchestrated by ‘Twitter mobs’, ‘Facebook mobs’ and ‘Blackberry mobs’. After one a few month ago told we had ‘Twitter revolutions’ and ‘Facebook revolutions’ in Egypt and Tunisia, one now hears about ‘social media mobs’ in the UK.” (2011)

Though these kinds of websites were primarily established to provide entertainment, and the majority of people joining social media platforms are only there to have ‘fun’, there is a growing body of users who are experimenting with ways to use these social networks in the pursuit of more serious goals. Nishant Shah discusses this ‘fun’ aspect of flash mobs in his brilliant essay entitled Once Upon a Flash (2006), where he describes flash mobs as artistic performance, such as group dancing in public spaces. ‘Improv Everywhere’, a New York City based prank collective, provides more examples of ‘funny’ flash mobs on their website,5 and the description from their recent book, Causing a Scene, provides a good illustration of the phenomenon:

“From the infamous No Pants! Subway Ride to the legendary Grand Central Freeze, Improve Everywhere has been responsible for some of the most original and subversive pranks of the Internet age. In ‘Causing a Scene’, the group’s agents provide a hilarious firsthand account of their mischievous antics.” (HarperCollins, n.d.)

On the more serious side, flash mobs are proving to be an effective way of protesting autocratic governments, and have the potential to become an integral part of new social movements. One can look at these ‘funny’ flash mobs as practice rounds for more serious actions to come, such as how the funny SMSs that are often sent between friends in Iran paved the way for the use of SMS as a powerful tool to spread the news.

According to the American Heritage’ Dictionary of the English Language, “Flash” can be defined as: “a sudden and brilliant but short-lived outburst of light”, and “Mob” can be interpreted as the lack of law (2000), so we can understand the meaning of “Flash Mob” as: a sudden and brilliant but short-lived outburst of lawless group activity. In the words of Nishant Shah, to "Organize, congregate, act, disperse – that is the anatomy of a flash mob." (2006: 132) More than just for ‘fun’, this recipe is becoming particularly useful in the resistance against unjust rules, as we are finding that activists are using the flash mob as a “political weapon” for change, and a way to have “serious fun” (Shah, 2006: 134).

The use of flash mob techniques make it possible to organize groups of people who (mostly) don’t know each other, to be united by common goals. But we should not forget that the use of social media also makes activists more vulnerable.

5 See http://improveeverywhere.com
As discussed in the next section, social media allows governments to infiltrate activists' groups in order to identify and persecute flash mob participants. At the same time, as activists become more and more reliant on these new tools, the protests themselves become dependent on access to social media websites – meaning that if governments shut down these websites, many activists are left unprepared and unable to communicate.

While flash mobs may not create sudden political changes, the cumulative effects may prove to be incredibly powerful. If we think of an autocratic government as a glass of water, and each flash mob event as a weak attack that leaves invisible cracks that multiply and grow, we may find that one day, the glass will explode.

**New Media Activism and the Internet Protection Movement**

In recent years there has been an overwhelmingly enthusiastic response among academics to the new possibilities that the tools of New Media have opened up for activists around the world. Whether we’re talking about New Media as a tool for organizing offline actions, such as flash mobs, or as a new space for actions to take place, such as in the case of Tactical Media interventions, it is undeniable that “With the technological revolution in networks and the internet, collective action just got a whole lot easier.” (Aitchison & Peters, 2011: 48)

The growing body of literature surrounding New Media activism, however, also acknowledges that with these new possibilities come new risks. Columbus reminds us that “Although the Internet allows activists greater access to the tools of mass communication and coordination, it does not protect them from persecution.” (2010: 165), while other “…observers have noted that the very same technologies which give voice to democratic activists living under authoritarian rule can also be harnessed by their oppressors.” (Deibert & Rohozinski, 2010: 43)

This section begins with a brief overview of the body of literature surrounding the online surveillance and persecution of New Media activists, and continues with a discussion of some of the tools and tactics that New Media activists have developed in response to this repression.

**Online Surveillance and Persecution of New Media Activists**

With reference to the arrests of Egyptian protestors in 2008, Scholz warns that “In particularly repressive societies, Facebook groups are the wrong place to
organize political protest...” (2010: 28), and that “While effective for ad hoc mobilization, public displays of political opinion on the social Web allow police or a secret service to readily map networks of dissent and to shut them down.” (2010: 29) The danger faced by New Media activists under authoritarian rule is fairly well documented, such as Columbus’ discussion of the political persecution of Iranian bloggers (2010), and Lovink & Zehle’s reference to incommunicado journalists and media activists who all-too-frequently face torture, executions and ‘disappearances’ (2005: 3). Since 9/11, however, many liberal democratic states around the world have adopted legislation that “…paves the way for a far more permissive environment for electronic surveillance…” (Deibert, 2008: 151), and the online surveillance of activist communities as a way of policing social movements and stifling political protest is a growing concern for activists under traditionally repressive regimes and in Western democracies alike.7

The Internet Protection Movement

An emerging response to these issues is the involvement of New Media activists in what Deibert calls the ‘Internet protection movement’ (2008) – a transnational social movement aiming to “uphold the Internet as a forum of free expression and access to information” (2008: 155).

Both Deibert (2008) and Hintz (2007) have written about the United Nations’ effort to create international policy on Internet governance through the World Summit of the Information Society and the Internet Governance Forum. While both authors acknowledge that activists and other civil society media groups have been recognized as stakeholders in the process, Deibert in particular claims that the inclusion of activist voices has had an ambiguous effect on the outcomes (2008: 362).

According to Deibert, the area of the Internet protection movement where the efforts of New Media activists can “be most tangibly felt is in building code, software, and other tools explicitly designed from an Internet protection perspective.” (2008: 157) Deibert (2008) and Scholz (2010) point to tools such as ‘Tor’, which can anonymize users “Web browsing, publishing, and instant

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6 “… a state of being without the means or rights to communicate...” (Lovink & Sehle, 2005: 3)

7 Interestingly, a discussion of the repressive surveillance of Western activists seems to be missing from the academic debate. The democratic right to protest is such a strong part of our collective identity in the Western world, that the very idea of the repression of political activists in places such as Scandinavia, Canada, and the United Kingdom, is almost unthinkable. It is possible that the absence of this discussion is due to the fact that it has simply not occurred to Western, English speaking academics that the repression of activists in Western democracies is a phenomenon that needs to be studied. On the other hand, it is much easier for academics to criticize the repressive governments and police forces of “others” than it is for us to speak out against our own leaders. Whatever the reason for this silence, anecdotal evidence surfacing from convergences such as the COP15 protests in Copenhagen in 2009, and the G8/G20 protests in Toronto in 2010, suggests that this is an area that desperately needs to be researched.
messaging” (Scholz, 2008: 361), and open source social media alternatives, such as Crabgrass and the forthcoming platform Diaspora, as real solutions to the online privacy of activists. Concerns have been raised about the sustainability and reach of such alternatives (Diebert, 2008), but the overall reaction from academics and activists has been one of great optimism.

Non-Hierarchy and The Open-Sourcing of Activism

There has also recently been some interesting discussion of how the use of New Media as an organizational tool is transforming the very structure of activist networks. Castells notes that new communication technologies are allowing many activists in the movement against corporate globalization to put their anarchist ideals of non-hierarchy and self-management into organizational practice on a larger scale than ever before (2009), and Aitchison & Peters argue that this non-hierarchical and amorphous nature of networked activism “may be its strength.” (2011: 60) Columbus, observing that “Authorities do not readily understand nonhierarchical forms of organization” (2010: 173), writes that “Because social media-powered activism does not need strong hierarchies, governments often have trouble finding a campaign’s leaders...” (Columbus, 2010: 172). By facilitating mass movements in claiming collective organizational responsibility for protests, the use of New Media is affording both online and offline activists greater protection from individual persecution.

Conclusion

Researching and writing about activism in and through the so-called new media in our context, brings forward a number of questions: Does new media accelerate or even promote political action? Is it really a powerful tool for social change? Did it create new or more activism in the world? And as the new media are also called information and communication technologies, are people really more informed and communicating more?

Regardless, these technologies are powerful tools and provide theoretical possibilities to be au courant far quicker and far more easily than through the old media. This may mean it has accelerated protest culture. However, as critical authors like Greet Lovink, Soenke Zehle or Jan Nederveen Pieterse et al write, for example in the incommunicado reader, the overestimation of the technology is misleading as well as the so called digital divide (Pieterse, 2005: 12). Pieterse refers to this as “Digital Capitalism and Development, The Unbearable Lightness of ICT4D.”

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8 Columbus goes so far as to say that anonymity is “the principle way online activists avoid persecution.” (2010: 176)

9 See http://crabgrass.riseuplabs.org/

10 See http://diasporafoundation.org/
The argument is that there is not a digital divide, but “only” a far deeper and existential one: the ‘heconomy’- the hegemonic, thus economic divide of the powerful who control the weaker.

This example is one illustration of what is also true for new media activism. If we overestimate the technology, which has been implicit in much of the work around new media activism, we “deprive the people of their agency”, as Firoce Manji lately said in a lecture about the (PAN!)African (socio political) conditions and uprisings. It would also be ignorant to underestimate new media, as the possibilities are there for a quick, creative, participatory, horizontal communication and activism as the examples from hacktivism to flash mobs in our text have demonstrated.

But by using these tactics from below, it is clear that activism takes place in the ‘democratic’ space – online and offline- and that it is also vulnerable to attempts of surveillance and control. For this reason it is crucial (actually for everybody, but especially) for the activists who challenge the systems, to be aware of especially the online-surveillance-possibilities of state-private-cooperations like Facebook with its biometrical software application and storage of uncountable data.

As new media activism comes of age, critical discussions about its purpose, methods and identity will continue. As a realm of action and as a producer of discourse it can only grow. As access to these mediums spreads we will see the addition of now absent voices to debates around its form and use and likely see a more inclusive range of producers and actors. Analysts may struggle with the multitudes of voices it may be able to include and the reams of data that could be considered.

These examples illustrate, that the ‘powerless’ can use subversive tactics to scare and disturb the ‘powerful’ by showing them the limitation of their power with ‘small media’ (as described by Anders Hog Hansen in his lecture on October 11). However, tactical media, as well as social media or even hacktivism, makes sense only in its interaction between the online and the offline space. In the end it is about the individual, the collective, and society as a whole. All of this begetting the question, “In what kind of a world we want to live in?” “Is a better world possible?”
References

**Figure 1** – Retrieved from: http://www.arsehsevom.net/zine/?p=60

**Figure 2** – Retrieved from: http://www.upress.umn.edu/book-division/books/tactical-media

**Figure 3** – Copy of the book cover of Donna Haraway’s *Cyborg Manifesto*, Painting by Lynn Randolph of the Science Fiction Figure Lisa Foo, a cyberpunk hacker.

**Figure 4** – Retrieved from: http://improveeverywhere.com/2011/07/25/the-mp3-experiment-eight/

**Figure 5** – Retrieved from: http://www.newint.org/features/special/2009/06/01/police-surveillance/


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®™ark Website: http://www.rtmark.com/


