

Explorations in the Tension Between Media Activism and Action-Oriented Media Pedagogy

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Abstract:

In historically, culturally, and technically variable media constellations various forms of media activism, media education and learning design have been developed. As to media activism, there is a broad spectrum including graffiti, radio activism, community media, visual activism, tactical media (Garcia & Lovink, 1997), and more recently, media interventions questioning the workings of biopower (Da Costa & Philip, 2008). On the other hand, debates on media competency and media literacy have been going on for a few decades. Although media have also been conceptualized as media of resistance or critique in informal contexts as well as in formal education, lively exchanges of concepts and ideas are comparatively seldom in respective traditions. The paper aims at exploring challenges for media education and interfaces between both fields.

Keywords:

media activism, tactical media, concepts of media pedagogy, media competence, media formation

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Introduction

The key words “media activism” and “media pedagogy” point to diverse and diffuse fields of discourse which are intrinsically very heterogeneous and whose relationship between each other seems in need of clarification. The study of forms of media activism is in the early stages, and the state of research into questions of media education, media competence, and media formation conducted in the fields of education, communication and media studies is highly disparate. This disparity does not only concern the choice of starting points and references to time diagnoses, or the fact that so many disciplines are involved, all having different notions of science and scholarship, (meta-)theoretical patterns of reasoning, methodical preferences, terminologies and combinations of utility and/or knowledge-oriented research interests. It also concerns corresponding notions about the primary responsibilities and functions of media pedagogy, or about “therapy suggestions” regarding the qualitative improvement of learning cultures and learning environments, the distribution of educational and participatory opportunities, or identified dynamics of knowledge and communication gaps. The diversity of discourses should not hide (at least) two facts:

First of all, convergences have also been identifiable in the debates for several years, for instance, in regard to abstaining from the romanticization of “premedial” times and from the idea that successful processes of growing up, communication and education could be possible exclusively or largely beyond media worlds. The “no education without media” initiative serves as current evidence of a broadly supported activity capable of consensus in many places¹.

¹ Cf. <http://www.keine-bildung-ohne-medien.de/> and <http://www.keine-bildung-ohne-medien.de/medienpaedagogisches-manifest.pdf>

Secondly, even with the diffusion of digital information and communication technology (ICT), society still views media pedagogy only marginally and modestly affordable, if at all (exceptions prove the rule). The discourses on internal legitimization frequently contrast with those on external legitimization. At least, the widespread statements professing the importance of media for work, education, learning and communication generally remain as noncommittal as the media-pedagogically relevant decrees that notoriously lack funding for implementation. The issue here is not only the hierarchization of areas of society, academic disciplines or research types, but also the predominantly implicit questioning of pedagogical claims and demands of caring. As far as institutionalized education is concerned, this is a crossing point of highly diverse interests as well as traditions of educational and net criticism (cf. e.g., Coombs, 1968; Illich, 1971; Downes, 2008).

Another convergence in media-pedagogical debates relates to “media activism” *ex negationis*, so to speak, as the key word appears neither in older nor in more recent handbooks (Hiegemann & Swoboda, 1994; Hüther, 2005; Sander, von Gross, Hugger, 2008) and is explicitly referred to only sporadically. Depending on the concept and definition of media-activist traditions, there are definitely a number of studies that deal with the subject, in addition to many notions of criticism in discourses on media pedagogy and media competence (Ganguin, 2004) that offer linking points for starting a debate.

The relationship between media activism and (action-oriented) media pedagogy can be described in very diverse ways, ranging from the assumption of incompatible, disjunctive areas to a total inclusion in the sense of media pedagogy as media activism (Wimmer, 2009). In the following, a few relevant aspects of this spectrum will be examined and put up for debate.

Meanings of Media Activism

Considering the variety of phenomena that can be gathered from an internet search of the key word “media activism”, it would be quite reasonable to conclude that it is “everything and nothing”. On the one hand, the past few years people have seen the emergence of so many politically, culturally or artistically driven forms of “activism” using digital media that a broad concept of media activism also contains various open publication forms, social network and protest activities. On the other hand, the few definitions remain noncommittal, and the activists largely stay among themselves (Nowak, 2004).

Lasar (2007), for instance, provided a definition of that kind when he wrote:

Media activism can be defined as two related kinds of activity. One creates media that challenge the dominant culture, structure, or ruling class of a society. The other advocates changes within that society intended to preserve or open up space for such media. Often media activism encompasses both these activities in the same historical moment; or it quickly moves between the two modes of action. (Lasar, 2007, p. 925)

While Lasar supported his account with examples from the United States since the 18th century, Sützl (2011) outlined the subject historically from the perspective of carnival cultures as media of resistance since the middle ages. By doing so, he opposed, among other things, constricted views (potentially) suggested by effective tactical media interventions in the 1990s.

The high publicity of tactical media in the 1990s caused the emergence of media activism as a notion in the first place and enabled a discourse on media disobedience on the internet. However, it has also led to a narrow focus which equates tactical media with media activism and does not know a before and after. This approach can indeed view the Web 2.0 only as a Hegelian sublation of media activism, because “with blogs, Twitter and Facebook, everyone is his own media activist” (Dusini, 2010, p. 58), and does not need a tactic anymore. This point of view eliminates the existence of a disobedient, oppositional media culture potentially different from a “normal” use that is adjusted to the circumstances. (Sützl, 2011, p. 3)

Conversely, the historical approach to media activism allows for highlighting “media history as the history of resistance” (Sützl, 2011, p. 9), and not only in terms of content, but also as a “mode of media history which facilitates the comprehension of media activism in its political dimension” (Sützl, 2011, p. 9).

Robert Huesca arrived at a similar characterization—though without recourse to the history of carnival cultures—when he wrote:

Activist media are radio, television, and other media practices that aim to effect social change and that generally engage in some sort of structural analysis concerned with power and the reconstitution of society into more egalitarian arrangements. Many activist media practices are also committed to principles of communication democracy, which place at their core notions of popular access, participation, and self-management in the communication process. (Huesca, 2008, p. 31)

Huesca pointed to the “dual characteristic” (2008, p. 31) between structural analysis and democratic communication practices, which for many media projects represents a fundamental difficulty, though not an insurmountable obstacle². In regard to product and process orientation, he saw a tendency toward high-quality audiovisual products which appeal to a mass audience, and emphasized highly reflected and differentiated offers for specific user groups, grassroots movements, and empowerment strategies (Huesca, 2008, p. 32).

Additional helpful clues for the definition of media activism are provided by Graham Meikle (2002) in his study *Future Active: Media Activism and the Internet*. He put the basic distinction between open and closed systems at the core of his considerations and case studies (Meikle, 2002, p. 13). Meikle associated openness with the kind of imperfection that is typical of open source and open content developments. Accordingly, media activism is a possible umbrella term for those intervening forms of media appropriation that can be labeled open and incomplete as well as spontaneous and

² <http://www.indymedia.org/>

temporary. In a more recent publication, Meikle (2010) distinguished four dimensions of net activism, namely, intercreative texts (in the sense of Tim Berners-Lee), tactics, strategies, and networks.

In the face of the numerous individual views on media activism and attempts to define it, the author sees two viable options: On the one hand, media activism can be regarded as a collective term for the diverse forms of politically and/or culturally motivated protest and participation media which sound out or activate potentials for social change. Subsequently, the different orientations, languages, methods and objectives need to be described on a case-by-case basis, be they historical “media of disobedience” (Sützl, 2011), or contemporary forms of media activism such as culture jamming, hacktivism, alternative media, tactical media, electronic civil disobedience, electronic street theatre, swarming, and anti-corporate saboteurs.

On the other hand, it is possible to establish (even meta-theoretically satisfying) interrelations among the heterogeneous range of phenomena by applying the concept of variations suggested by Goodman (1995) and Goodman and Elgin (1988). They start from the assumption that no cognitive question can be definitively answered on a solid basis. In other words, there is no “epistemological Switzerland” and no innocent view from “way out there”, and there is no mega-perspective capable of reconciling all other perspectives (Goodman, 1995, p. 18). However, it is quite possible to relate the different worlds to each other, not by reverting to a reality that underlies everything but by correlating the descriptions that are conceived as variations (Hug, 2002).

This concept of variations steers clear of the pitfalls of psychologism and sociologism since it does not refer to the psychology or sociology of creating worlds but to philosophical aspects of how different worlds may be interrelated. Individual variations are considered representations of an original, yet the original “as such” cannot serve as a criterion for comparing the varying descriptions with the original. Rather, the similarities

of the description variations are only created by means of those perspectives which at the same time make a difference between variation and original (Goodman & Elgin, 1988, p. 66).

Correspondingly, there is no intention of raising the question of an original form of media activism which could function as a criterion for comparing historically and systematically varying descriptions. Instead, the focus is on explaining conceptual possibilities of relating different worlds and variations in the sense of Goodman and Elgin (1988, pp. 66-82), or put differently: on explaining aspects which make the different forms of media activism appear as variations of one subject. The following are examples of such aspects:

- (1) unconventional use of media in the context of creative re-framings or social orientations;
- (2) strengthening of minority developments as well as questioning and critique of mainstream developments, structural constraints, power relations or cultures of sovereignty;
- (3) cognitive autonomy in oppositional constituent cultures.

These aspects do not take the place of an explicit definition but represent selected perspectives which have different occurrences and open up specific possibilities for contrast without the need for ontological commitment or disciplinal reductionism. They allow for descriptions of media activism as variations of one theme.

Challenges for (Action-Oriented) Media Pedagogy

Action-oriented media pedagogy is widely known and accepted today as an orientation of media pedagogy. One of its most important reference sources is critical media theory of the 1960s, which is why it emphasizes the competence for critical-reflective media use. This approach does not turn the subjects into essentially victims of the media in need of

enlightenment, but accredits them with the basic ability to critically receive and design media (Schorb, 2008). This shift of perspective from recipient to producer of media has increased the significance of pragmatic dimensions like defining personal goals and needs, designing and disseminating personal content, and expanding aesthetic experiences. The approaches of action-oriented media pedagogy are thus not limited to reflecting what media do to people, but instead give priority to what people do with media. It is imperative to live up to these dimensions by making available instructions for practical, more or less politically motivated media work, for example in the form of photo or video projects, radio shows or internet projects (Brenner & Niesyto, 1993; Tulodziecki et al., 1995; Tulodziecki, Herzig, & Grafe, 2010, pp. 166-172), with an emphasis on different modes of orientation to process, project, product, communication, situation, culture, education, life world, critical emancipation or social ecology. It frequently shows that the goal of developing action competences for media use and expanding related scopes of action is partially counterfactual because the pertinent projects hardly ever lead to a permanent and active participation in and shaping of the public spheres of mediated cultural life.

On the one hand, the social, political, emancipatory and aesthetic demands in the field of action-oriented media pedagogy render it possible to draw parallels to media-activist orientations. On the other hand, media activism also sheds light on challenges whose closer examination should be worthwhile:

In regard to *conceptual aspects*, academic standards and theoretical motives, the author thinks a historical inquiry is advisable. The development of positions outside of the media-pedagogical mainstream seems to correspond with a differentiation of notions of criticism that is worth some reflection. Furthermore, the author thinks it is appropriate to deal explicitly with the concepts of action, effect and reality, as well as with the limitations to the responsibility of media pedagogy as a subarea of education, media and communication studies. There are additional challenges relating to media anthropology

such as those emerging in the light of biocybernetic developments in general and “biomedia” (Thacker, 2004) and biopolitical forms of media activism in particular (Da Costa & Philip, 2008).

Concerning *media formation in schools*, the author sees challenges in regard to methods/didactics, content/topics and institutions. Which expansions of the scopes of didactic action are possible, and where are the limits? What is happening in regard to critical-emancipatory demands in the context of schools, and what can be learned from media activist projects past and present about the design of future-oriented educational processes? This is linked to the question of how schools as learning spaces relate to educational spaces outside of school. In this context, exploring the possibilities and limitations of institutional self-reflection is likely to be a special challenge, conceptually as well as in terms of the active media work in schools, at least insofar as they are regulated in the sense of a “monomedial province” (Böhme, 2006).

Challenges are beginning to show not only in conjunction with school education, but with media work outside of school. They are related for example to the question of how to reflect and design forms of media appropriation, spaces for action and articulation, empowerment strategies, and the development of (meta-)media competence (Niedermaier, 2000).

Media Activism and Action-Oriented Media Pedagogy — Aspects of Defining a Relation

Roughly speaking, the projects of media activism and action-oriented media pedagogy can be considered forms of intervention in society. Their spheres are disjunctive or identical depending on whether we conceive them broadly or narrowly. Overall, the author finds three options worth discussing:

(1) Media activism and action-oriented media pedagogy are largely disjunctive spheres when considering that at least institutionalized media pedagogy is only partially concerned with exposing the shortcomings of democracy, practicing civil disobedience, promoting moral courage and resistance opposite problematic mainstream developments, and the transmedial organization of processes of learning and education.

(2) Conversely, the two spheres can be described as largely identical in the sense that specific positions relate to, and are related to, demands for integrating theorizing with the intervening application of theory, for the bricolage-style linking of socio-critical pedagogy and action-oriented media pedagogy, as well as for promoting disadvantaged groups, contexts of self-empowerment, social initiatives, emancipatory transformations and pedagogical counter public (cf. e.g., Giroux, 2001)³.

(3) Partial overlaps of the spheres can be plausibly established insofar as basic socio- and media- critical motives play an important role in both, as do claims of expanding scopes of action and uncovering and partially overcoming hegemonic tendencies and power interests. However, depending on the approach and the specific project, there are also differences which can be found and defined based on such aspects as temporality (forms of short- or long- term intervention), institutional responsibility and legal mandate, the significance of the independent will of people and media, the reach of demands for media education for all, many or some, and also forms of communicatively (de-)stabilizing all kinds of relationships.

³ Correspondingly, Jeffrey Wimmer (2009) deals with Giroux's positions in the context of media activism.

The three options show the shortcomings of simple juxtapositions à la staid media pedagogy vs. critical media activism, or tame criticism vs. down-to-earth yet effective intervention. Claims of critiquing and democratizing communication structures are significant in both areas. Action-oriented media pedagogy does not only deal with differentiated perception, interpretation, analysis and reflection but also with change-oriented forms of intervention. The differentiations which Sonja Ganguin (2004) developed for the media competence discourse by means of the dimensions of cognitive, decoding, analytical, reflective and judgmental ability, play a role here as well. Apart from further conceptualization options, for instance, concerning a critique of the basic dichotomy real vs. fictional in favor of diverse forms of modalizing experiences of reality and other meta-critical considerations (cf. Schmidt, 2000, pp. 155-175), there arises the question as to the performative dimensions. Creating the foundations and preconditions of allowing “people to produce unlimited variations of media-critical thoughts, phrases and actions in order to lead successful, self-determined and responsible lives in today’s media society”(Ganguin, 2004, p. 5) is one thing, but the question of the actual implementations on the basis of the specific foundations is quite another.

Conclusions

The conclusion remains ambivalent because, on the one hand, the issue of a governmentalist media pedagogy (Heel, 2005) is far from outdated, in regard to discourses on media competence as well as to action-oriented media pedagogy. Insofar as the latter implicitly or explicitly pursues claims of de-governmentalization, however, arguments in favor of a disjunctive relationship between media activism and action-oriented media pedagogy are put into perspective. On the other hand, a closer examination of both fields reveals that justified criticism can revert to the absolutization of partial aspects, to dogmatic blindness or strategies of missionary persuasion. Even de-governmentalization

efforts may emerge as re-governmentalization attempts on other levels. For media-pedagogical projects in the area of institutionalized education, it may be the case that aspects of continuity, stabilization, legality and sincerity with respect to demands for (media) education for all correspond with limitations to media-activist risk taking, despite voices that call into question “education as a special area” (Faßler, 2010). This does not mean, however, that it is impossible to expand the scopes of action or to develop transmedial educational spaces. And when Bob Ferguson (2008) writes that “the carnival is over” (Ferguson, 2008), he is referring to those forms which happen only once a year (Ferguson, 2008, p. 129). Carnival cultures as media of resistance, by contrast, can be cultivated in both media activism and action-oriented media pedagogy.

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