

From jamming the motor to hacking the computer: The case of Adbusters

by Karl Palmås

Centre for Business in Society, Gothenburg University

In the past few years, concepts such as “hacking”, “open source”, “protocols” and “peer-to-peer” have begun to circulate in settings that bear little relation to actual computers. Using Adbusters as an example, this article will explore how social activists are developing strategies of resistance on the basis of a nascent computer-inspired worldview.

Conceptual models and machinic eras

The conceptual models that underpin our worldviews are tightly intertwined with the everyday technologies that surround us. Michel Serres², whose

2 Serres, M. (1982)

thoughts have more recently been picked up by Manuel DeLanda³, theorised this very relation. As DeLanda explains:

“Serres was the first to point out that the transition between the clockwork age and the motor age had more profound implications than the simple addition of a new brand of machines to the technological ‘races’ already in existence. He sees in the emergence of the steam motor a complete break with the conceptual models of the past. [...]”

When the abstract mechanism [of a motor, such as the so-called ‘Carnot cycle’ of the heat engine] had been dissociated from its physical contraption [the actual motor] it entered the lineages of other technologies, including the ‘conceptual technology’ of science⁴.”

Thus, Serres argues that as new types of machines enter the social world, they may end up changing our ways of seeing the world. The logic of the motor did not only appear in the contraptions studied by engineers and natural scientists: it also shaped the theories of modern social scientists, philosophers and artists. In their introduction to the English edition of Serres’ book *Hermes*, Josué Harari and David Bell state that Serres charted how the motor emerged as “the universal model of knowledge in the nineteenth century, a construct that always functions in the same way in all cultural domains – from Marx to Freud, from Nietzsche to Bergson, or from Zola to Turner.”

In order for the motor “logic” to spread from the physical, actual motor to the minds of social scientists and authors, the operational diagram of the machine had to be formulated in generic, abstract terms. As DeLanda points out, this process was slow in the making:

“In 1824, a century after it was born as a concrete assemblage, the steam motor was given a completely abstract description by Carnot and began to influence other technologies⁵.”

However, we are now living in a world in which motors are no longer the dominant everyday technology. During the 20th century, computers have become more pervasive, leading the way to a new machinic era. Thus, the

3 DeLanda, M. (1991)

4 DeLanda (1991), p. 140-141

5 DeLanda (1991), p. 142

“abstract mechanisms” of computers are now making their way into contemporary practices of social activists. So, in what ways can traditional modes of protest be seen as motor-inspired?

Motor activism

Michel Serres describes motor-like conceptual models in the same way as Carnot described the heat engine. They draw on a “reservoir” of fuel, creating a “energy differential”, generating “circulation” and “motion”. In the case of modern social theory:

“...the reservoir is capital, the quantity of energy, the constancy of force, the libidinal reservoir; [...] the pattern of general circulation [...] is language, speech, words, vocabulary, values, money, desire⁶.”

Thus, Serres’ remarks apply specifically to Marx (capital as reservoir, money circulating) as well as Freud (libido as reservoir, desire circulating). Thus, the politics of these apparatuses concerns issues like “What blocks circulation? What stimulates it? Who or what governs or forms the reservoir?”.

This characterisation of Marx and Freud is noteworthy, as these authors have been hugely influential in founding modern social critique, and still feature prominently in activist circles. In *The Rebel Sell*, Joseph Heath and Andrew Potter argue that since 1968, a “Marx-plus-Freud” world view has dominated social critique and activism – in other words, “counterculture has almost completely replaced socialism as the basis of radical political thought”⁷. Hence, activists have tended to prefer the countercultural political strategies of the situationist, hippie and culture-jamming movements, rather than engaging in traditional social reform. Incidentally, the same phenomenon is also observed by Boltanski and Chiapello, who argue that “artistic critique” (of capitalist inauthenticity) has usurped “social critique” (of capitalist exploitation)⁸.

6 Serres (1982)

7 Heath, J. & A. Potter (2005)

8 Boltanski, L. & E. Chiapello (2006)

Back in 1968, Theodore Roszak related “the making of a counter culture”⁹ to Herbert Marcuse’s blend of Marx and Freud. Crucially, this worldview highlighted the ways in which culture – mass media, advertising and contemporary modes of thought – undermined productive critiques of capitalism. Hence, Marcuse’s industrial capitalism can thus be modelled as a closed system of adjoined motors. The motor-like capitalist society described by Marx is married to the motor-like civilisation described by Freud¹⁰, creating a stable, repressive engine. The Marxian motion towards revolution generated by the reservoir of capital is counteracted by the Freudian motion generated by libidinal reservoir.

Heath and Potter uses blockbuster movie “The Matrix” to illustrate this view of culture and society. To lead a true existence, free from exploitation, one has to opt for the red pill that ejects the lead character Neo from the simulated world that is “The Matrix”, enabling him to see the monstrosity of its underlying reality. Thus, countercultural activism and protest strategies can be seen as efforts to act as this red pill.

Adbusters: Jamming the motor...

For the countercultural youth, the only way out of this total motor was to throw gravel into the machinery, jamming its modes of operation, thus baring the monstrosity of the machine for all of the world to see. Public demonstrations, sit-ins, subversive art and various ways of “dropping out” mainstream culture were all different approaches to achieve this effect. Here, the obvious reference was the critical strategies – notably detournement – of Guy Debord and the Situationist International. More recently, culture jamming has served the same end:

“The goal of culture jammers is quite literally to ‘jam’ the culture, by subverting the messages used to reproduce this faith and blocking the channels through which it is propagated¹¹.”

9 Roszak, T. (1971)

10 Freud, S. (1989 {1930})

11 Heath & Potter (2005)

Through the paramount success of Naomi Klein's *No Logo*¹², a new generation of activists have been introduced to the "culture jamming" strategies of Adbusters magazine. Incidentally, the magazine is also one of the key targets for Heath and Potter's criticism, as the magazine can be viewed as "the flagship publication of the culture-jamming movement"¹³.

Heath and Potter's criticism revolves around the fact that Adbusters hark back to countercultural rhetoric, while their actual practices now include the manufacturing and sale of fairtrade goods such as the "Blackspot Sneaker". Thus, "cultural rebellion, of the type epitomised by Adbusters magazine, is not a threat to the system – it is the system".

Nevertheless, Adbusters has since then departed from the rhetoric of detournement and culture jamming. In the "Big ideas of 2006" issue and onwards, the magazine started celebrating a new activist hero – "the antipreneur".

"While giant corporations run roughshod over our lives, we whine and complain, protest and boycott. For too long we've ignored the market, written it off as enemy territory. Yet, what do mega-corps like Walmart and Coke fear most? Competition. We're talking about a new breed of bottom-up enterprise that runs differently: promoting ethics over profit, values over image, idealism over hype. A brand of grassroots capitalism that deals in products we actually need – and believe in. No sweatshops. No mindfucking ads. Just fair trade from sustainable, accountable companies. Run by us, the antipreneurs¹⁴."

Thus, the hallmark of the countercultural worldview – the view of capitalism as a motor-like system, only to be transformed through jamming strategies – was no longer adhered to. The market – no longer a space for natural law-guided domination – emerged as a field of bottom-up, grassroots politico-entrepreneurial action. Capitalism – no longer a closed,

¹² Klein, N. (1999)

¹³ Heath & Potter (2005)

¹⁴ Adbusters Magazine, "The Big Ideas of 2006" issue

motor-like machine that circulates capital and desire – was increasingly described as an open structure, potentially subject to rearrangement.

... or hacking the capitalist operating system?

One of the key components of Adbusters' antipreneur strategies is the notion that, as activists share knowledge and ideas, their chances of building robust alternatives to large corporations increase considerably. These shared ideas and strategies "will transform the antipreneurial movement, along with open-source counter-brands like the Blackspot, into a real economic threat to top-down corporate capitalism – through the next year, the next ten, and well into a saner, more democratic future."¹⁵

The focus on creating networks of knowledge-sharing, and the direct reference to "open-source", indicates that Adbusters – just like the innovation theorists mentioned above – have gained inspiration from the success of the FLOSS (Free/Libre Open Source Software) movement.

Just like hackers sharing knowledge in order to collectively hack a system – "given enough eyeballs, all bugs are shallow", as programmer Eric Raymond phrases it¹⁶ – the collective of antipreneurs share ideas in order to modify capitalism. Thus, concepts from the world of computer networks seem to have seeped into the ex-culture jammers' understanding of the world. Notions of "open source" and hacking no longer apply just to computer networks as such – increasingly, they are applied to other social apparatuses.

¹⁵ Adbusters Magazine, Ibid.

¹⁶ Raymond, E.S. (2001)

The move towards understanding the economy as a computer was finalised in the September/October issue of Adbusters. Here, the main feature article explicitly depicts capitalism as an operating system:

“Capitalism is the almighty operating system of our lives [...] But who is in charge of this operating system? Who wrote it? Who maintains it? Who protects it from viruses? Who reboots it when it crashes? So here’s the big question: can we the people – civil society – take charge? Can we rewrite the capitalist code? [...] In other words, can we turn capitalism into an open source design project and make it more sustainable and responsible to our and future generation’s [sic] needs?”¹⁷

Perhaps the most interesting aspect of Adbusters’ recent move to promote antipreneurship is its commitment to the hacker ethic. In the quote above (on building “a real economic threat to top-down corporate capitalism”) the long-term strategy of the antipreneurship strategy is to build robust competitors to large corporations – alternative structures that can latch onto the current market settings. Unlike their previous countercultural imperative to de(con)struct the societal machine, Adbusters’ new imperative is to experiment with its possibilities, rewriting its underlying code. Here, Adbusters is joining a growing number of writers who argue that the hacker is the ideal artist/critic of the 21st century. For instance, the philosopher Manuel DeLanda has stated that activists:

“need to adopt a hacker attitude towards all forms of knowledge: not only to learn UNIX or Windows NT to hack this or that computer system, but to learn economics, sociology, physics, biology to hack reality itself. It is precisely the ‘can do’ mentality of the hacker, naive as it may sometimes be, that we need to nurture everywhere”¹⁸.

In other words, as an alternative to Heath and Potter’s interpretation of “The Matrix”: The point is not that we need to “swallow the red pill” in order to become enlightened critics. The point is that by getting access to, understanding, and rewriting the code that underpins this world (as Neo does towards the end of the film), we can “hack reality itself”.

¹⁷ Adbusters Magazine, September/October 2006 issue

¹⁸ Excerpt from an interview conducted by DJ Spooky

The rise of the hacker ethic is not only apparent within social activism, but also within contemporary art. In *Postproduction. Culture as screenplay: how art reprograms the world*¹⁹, art critic Nicolas Bourriaud argues that the hacker and the “deejay” are today’s cultural and political heroes. Like DeLanda, Bourriaud invokes Deleuze in his account of how the hacker-/deejay-inspired ethic leads us towards a new form of critique, which is an attitude, an ethical stance more than a recipe:

“The postproduction of work allows the artist to escape the posture of interpretation [as assumed by the post-1968 critic]. Instead of engaging in critical commentary, we have to experiment, as Deleuze asked of psychoanalysis: to stop interpreting symptoms and try more suitable arrangements”²⁰.”

Bourriaud argues that this experimental approach to the re-use of existing art differs from previous modes of Situationist-inspired art: “While the detournement of preexisting artworks is a currently employed tool, artists use it not to ‘devalorize’ the work of art but to utilize it”.

A new research agenda

Adbusters is just one example of activists who are realigning their strategies. Indeed, in the past decade or so, several cultural spheres have adopted the abstract mechanisms of computers in their understanding of the world²¹. For scholars interested in protest and social activism, this opens an interesting research agenda: Where else are “abstracted” hacktivist practices being deployed? Are they solely a novel phenomenon, or did they exist before the advent of computers? Moreover, are these approaches effective, and if so, in what contexts?

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