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(Dis)emancipatory technologies (Editorial)

In the 19th and especially the 20th century, powerful emancipatory processes were taking place that reached a climax in the middle of the 20th century. The massive civil rights movements of the late 1960s included women, aboriginal people, people of colour, ethnic and sexual minorities that were fighting for respect and representation within Western societies. These were powerful generational experiences and set the pattern for the emancipatory movements throughout the second half of the 20th century of groups seeking empowerment and social change, including deaf and disabled communities.

Most definitions emphasize the processual character of empowerment that regards either individuals¹ or communities². As Marc A. Zimmerman points out, this term can be understood as both value orientation for policy makers and social change, and as a “theoretical model for understanding the process and consequences of efforts to exert control and influence over decisions that affect one’s life, organisational functioning, and the quality of community life”³. What is in common across many various empowerment definitions are the issues of reclaiming control and gaining access to resources (including information). In many cases, technology plays the important role of empowering artefact⁴ that balances inequalities in access to resources and the communicational public sphere, helping both individuals and collectives to gain self-esteem, representation, and independence.

Communication technologies are perceived as powerful allies of communities fighting for empowerment and recognition. Skilfully used mass media such as press,

¹ D. Mechanic 1991, “Adolescents at risk: New Directions, conference paper cited after Marc A. Zimmerman, Empowerment Theory. Psychological, Organisational and Community Levels of Analysis”, in *Handbook of Community Psychology*, ed. J. Rappaport, E. Seidman, (New York: Springer Science and Business Media) (2000).

² Cornel Empowerment Group 1989, “Empowerment and family support”, *Network Bulletin*, 1, 1-23, cited after Marc A. Zimmerman.

³ Marc A. Zimmerman.

⁴ Carin Roos PhD & Åsa Wengelin “The text telephone as an empowering technology an empowering technology in the daily lives of deaf people—A qualitative study”, *Assistive Technology* 28:2, (2016), p. 63.

radio, and television may greatly assist minorities' efforts to influence public opinion and thereby pressure policy makers. This scenario is called "the boomerang effect"⁵: the media or NGOs are engaged to support and amplify the voices of groups whose causes are not audible in the public sphere due to oppression (such as lack of access). Thus, with the help of journalists or activists, the initial social, cultural and communicational inequalities are balanced.

However, the positive impact of communication technologies is not limited to mass media. There are examples of DIY technological practices that have had an important impact on oppressed groups. Teletypewriters for the deaf (initially invented, distributed and managed by the deaf themselves) that were introduced in the late 1960s in the United States and in the 1970s in Western Europe helped the deaf to overcome the constraints of voice-based telephony. Behind the Iron Curtain in Eastern European countries, both DIY radio receivers and skilfully used commercial models made it possible for people to access alternative Western free sources of information.

For the oppressed and excluded, electronic communication technologies seem even more supportive, especially social media. The rise of electronic media shows the emancipatory potential of information and communication technologies such as hacktivism or cloud protesting. It has made self-representation and activism much easier for communities whose options are limited due to their minority status, disability, and social or political situation, as shown by Mary L. Gray in "Out in the Country. Youth, Media, and Queer Visibility in Rural America"⁶ or Stefania Milan in "Social Movements and Their Technologies: Wiring Social Change"⁷. Technology enables limitations of the physical world such as the geographical spread of community members or architectural barriers to be overcome and makes it possible for minority groups (including the disabled) to enter the public sphere, network, and gain representation. On the other hand, technology may also act as a barrier that disabling users due to technical issues such as inaccessible software (as described and analysed by Katie Ellis and Michael Kent in "Disability and New Media"⁸. In 1999, Lawrence A. Scadden, a blind researcher, enthusiastically wrote, "The proliferation of optical character-recognition systems connected to speech synthesizers has brought me the ability to read almost any printed material independently. The growth of the Internet and the World Wide Web has resulted in my ability to communicate independently in text with people all over the world just as it has for you and for millions of other sighted and blind people. The ability to conduct research on-line

⁵ Leszek Porebski, „Internet jako narzędzie mobilizacji politycznej mniejszości”, in *Agora czy Hyde Park. Internet jako przestrzeń społeczna grup mniejszościowych* ed. Ł. Kaprańska, B. Pactwa (Kraków: Nomos) (2010).

⁶ Mary L. Gray, *Out in the Country. Youth, Media, and Queer Visibility in Rural America*, (New York University Press) (2009).

⁷ Stefania Milan, *Social Movements and Their Technologies: Wiring Social Change*, (Palgrave Macmillan) (2013).

⁸ Katie Ellis, Michael Kent, *Disability and New Media*, (Routledge) (2010).

has provided me a new-found independence”. However, he added, “This increased independence has been threatened from time to time with the emergence of new technology and new approaches for information presentation, but we continue to enable accessibility to evolve almost as fast as the technology”⁹.

Similarly, the impact of social media on so-called cyber revolutions that empowered the oppressed, such as the Arab Spring and the #occupymovement, was not as powerful as was initially recognised. These movements quickly gave up extensive usage of social media, as it is an extremely easy target for surveillance and abuse. In fact, technology can be an oppressive element from which some groups seek emancipation: perfect examples include the governmental and medical technologies, such as statistics and eugenics, which have been used in constructing normalcy in industrial societies since the 18th century.

There are more complex and in fact paradoxical examples of relations between technology and empowerment, such as the western deaf education system. Founded on the idea of the rationalized social order of Enlightenment, deaf residential schools were a tool for organising society by removing non-normative group members from the social domain and placing them in special institutions. Schools for the deaf (and also for the blind) were initially not educational but charity institutions, where children were normalized: taught how to fit in with hearing society. These institutions had full control over pupils’ bodies and constructed their professional lives by training them for a limited choice of occupations—all for the sake of making society more efficient. Schools for the deaf served as an apparatus for eliminating from society those who did not fit in, and returning them adapted and rehabilitated. However, schools at the same time gathered the dispersed deaf in one, physical space, thus creating a propitious milieu where unified sign language and later Deaf Culture emerged. In fact, the technology that was supposed to integrate the deaf into mainstream society facilitated the creation of a distinctive Deaf community and identity: a community of ‘others’. The most vivid consequences of these educational governmentality practices may still be observed in the United States (which inherited the French educational system), as strong and dynamic communities arose around schools for the deaf. They provided opportunities to meet future partners and friends and make life-along bonds, in fact to create an alternative social sphere.

Inspired by the diversity and ambiguity of the role of technology in emancipatory processes and practices, we present this issue of “TransMissions: The Journal of Film and Media Studies”, which is devoted to both the emancipatory and disempowering effects of technology. There are seven articles covering five thematic areas:

1. The role of technology in **minority groups gaining representation** under oppressive circumstances. In the article *Tamil Documentary Naali: Low-End*

⁹ Lawrence A. Scadden, “Empowerment Through Technology”, *Assistive Technology*, 11:1 (1999) 59-65.

Technology and Subaltern History, Swarnavel Eswaran Pillai analyses the film *Naali/The Stream* (directed by Murugavel and Lakshmanan; 2012). Shot with a simple handycam, this documentary brought the life and struggle of the local Tamil community into public discourse. The author points out the democratising potential of low-end technologies; however, it is also shown how they can be used both for and against local communities. The second article, *Minority representation in the Digital: Narratives from Christian Communities in Delhi* by Rajan Benson, is grounded in field research and concentrates on social media usage by one particular minority group. Benson shows the double-edged sword of technology that enables the Christian community in Delhi to gain representation and build collectivity in a hostile social and political realm, while also making it also possible to trace and threaten individual activists.

2. The **discriminative and disempowering potential of new media** platforms. In *Shaming and socially responsible online engagement*, Shadow W.J. Armfield, Dawn M. Armfield, and Laura O. Franklin investigate the problem of online linguistic and visual shaming based on their qualitative research of online communication.
3. The technologically boosted **reshaping of the (self)representation of people with disabilities**. Here we recommend two articles. The first is *Movement as language, signification as identity: Understanding and empowering the autistic community in online spaces*, in which Hannah Ebben analyses the potential of online video platforms for autistic community representation by studying videos uploaded by individuals within the spectrum. The second is *"Nostalgia for the future..." – prosthesis as a pop-cultural weapon?*, in which Marta Stańczyk analyses the most popular prosthesis users in American popular culture and investigates the shift within the meaning of prosthesis: from a sign of vulnerability and passivity to an identity-building element of individual empowerment.
4. The **narrative refiguration of ableism and disability** may be found in the article *Ableism and Futuristic Technology: The Enhancement of 'No Body' in the Films »Lucy« and »Her«* by nili R. Broyer. Applying transhumanism theory, the author tries to redefine the oppositions of ableism and disability within the narratives of the films.
5. The **impact of newly created technologies on artistic practices**. In her text, *The technologies of experimental Japanese filmmakers in the digital era*, Agnieszka Kiejziewicz presents four progressive Japanese visual artists who have gained more artistic freedom and access to potential audiences with skilful usage of digital technologies.