

How to be #Unsozials. Of Individual Sovereignty and Social Control in The Digitized Practice of Artistic Gathering and Activism.

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Abstract— What is sovereignty in the rule of law? Who is sovereign in a democratic state? These are key questions to effectively legitimize new creative strategies for political participation. With today’s liberal representative democracies mechanisms used to develop social control, citizens must be alert and aware of their own constitutional rights. Hence, how can we avoid unconscious misled obedience and loss of our sovereignty? Systematic standardizations of belief systems through education, politics, entertainment, religion or mass media have been the source of many studies since their inventions, and many agree that they benefit the ones in power using *the people* as a resource. This work offers an analysis of these phenomena focusing on the newer *digital media* and proposes original approaches towards raising awareness and making these issues palpable to the general public.

keywords— #unsozials, media theory, digital media, collective, activism, social media, privacy rights, sovereignty, social systems, political systems

INTRODUCTION

Social control exerted by businesses through governments and media has grown to be highly specialized and effective. For example, achieving conformity and homogeneity in the 21st century societal thinking, has made the civil society willingly hand over their personal data to the seamless and ubiquitous social media companies to turn it into a commodity (Schwartz, 2004, p.2070). Similarly, printed media, TV networks and radio are censored by the interests of their owners to represent a biased version of the world’s events (Xiang, 2007, p.623).

These tricky communication mechanisms of informal social control are a priority to maintain power and to manage behavior, contrasted to formal means of restraint such as law (Altheide, 1993, p.53).

If we explore the psychological mechanisms used to develop social control systems (see Table 1), we’ll notice how similar they are to various cultural groups, ranging from conventional organizations to more extreme cases such as cults and self-awareness or religious sects (O’Reilly, 1996, 170).

Table 1.
Designing Social Control Systems

1. “Vision” or purpose which provides intrinsic meaning to work.
2. Select people whose values are similar to the organization’s or who situation is likely to make them willing to change past beliefs and accept new ones (e.g., people without previous experience in the industry).
3. Use multiple recruiting steps requiring escalating commitment on the part of the recruit (e.g., require multiple visits and interviews).
4. Focus on core values for the recruit. Be clear and honest about the norms of the organization (e.g., attitudes and behaviors). Emphasize the affective ties among members and importance of fit.
5. Facilitate a “deselection” process emphasizing “choice.” Note that the organization is not for everyone; only certain people can join.
6. Provide extensive exposure to the core values through training, role models, senior management, and participation to emphasize the attitudes and behaviors expected by members. Minimize conflicting signals.
7. Promote strong cohort bonds and social ties among people (e.g., parties, celebrations, and “fun”). Emphasize teamwork and directed autonomy.
8. Offer visible, vivid, and consistent top management support. as explicit role models of attitudes and behavior. Set clear, difficult goals. Emphasize the intrinsic importance of the work, not the monetary rewards.
9. Provide frequent reinforcement of the attitudes and behaviors that reflect the core values, especially through recognition, celebration and group approval (e.g., design systems that promote recognition).

Note. Adapted from Culture as Social Control by O’Reilly, 1996.

In the end, social control is everywhere. Whenever an individual becomes part of an organization or group, willingly or not, he/she will be governed by the common interests rather than by his/her own. Most people today are members of some kind of group, at the most basic level, as they are part of society or culture. Being a *citizen* means to be part of a social structure in which understandings, customs and laws will regulate and direct the behavior of the group. Ultimately, we are all subjects to social control most part of our lives, if not for its entirety. Therefore, the question arises, how do we exercise our *individual sovereignty* in this context of privacy preying and deceitful social control mechanisms?

THE SCOPE OF SOVEREIGNTY

In a similar way in which it has been shown that social control is in every corner of the planet where people live in group, individual sovereignty will be brought to the attention. Individual sovereignty, self-ownership or simply freedom is a concept that is understood differently in the constitutions of each of the one hundred and ninety three sovereign nation-states recognized in the United Nations. Its interpretation has led to numerous legal cases that have shaped its form through higher or common law (*Yick Wo v. Hopkins*, 1886). Despite its many interpretations, individual sovereignty is closely related to the most basic human rights, e.g., dignity, freedom, equality, life.

On a broader view, the concept of *state* sovereignty is different from individual sovereignty. It refers to the recognition of a centralized government to rule over the people and property of a delimited geographical area or territory. It is independent and has autonomy over itself. This concept becomes blurry in light of globalization and often interference of foreign forces in less powerful countries. Nonetheless, the legal figures of sovereign states, freedom, justice and peace are recognized in the Westphalia sovereign state, in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and in the constitutions of UN's member states.

Germany's Basic Law (its constitution) for example, guarantees individual freedom and rights *through* the state, but it does so defining a person as part of a community and not as an isolated sovereign individual. Hence, the German idea of freedom relies upon government. In contrast, the concept of individual sovereignty in the United States constitution is more inclined towards freedom *from* government (Eberle, 2007, p. 61). This fundamental difference is reflected in the current neoliberal political tendencies of the United States of America under Donald Trump's regime, compared to the more moderate (but also neoliberal) political system of Angela Merkel's Christian democracy and social market. Therefore, individual freedom and markets are regulated in varying degrees throughout sovereign states. Correlating the understanding of individual sovereignty in the constitutions of states that play an important role in the hegemonic views of human civilization, with their actual economic and social policies, gives an overall idea of how to manage a political or social action, e.g., political activism.

APPROACHING ACTIVISM

After the previous analysis, it is hypothesized that the practice of gathering for political or social activism should be exercised having social control and individual sovereignty as a guideline in order to maximize its impact. Taking social control into account could help to determine the actions necessary to maintain anonymity, protect personal data, being well informed about facts and use current technology as a means to communicate the message of the protest effectively. Likewise, a well structured individual sovereignty knowledge base will allow members of the collective to embrace their autonomy and to strengthen the acknowledgement of the group as a whole at the same time. This is a well thought of theoretical starting point to approach collective activism, but the experience of proven practical methods would have to be implemented as well. Activism is well documented and has undergone an evolutionary process along with technological and social development.

In “The Art of Being Many” (2016), for example, a few questions and titles that became the outline for a research program about the assembly of the many, were also meant to induce the reader to analyze them and take action. (p.24)

These questions and titles are used here as the practical guideline to develop models for collective performative gatherings aimed to raise awareness about issues like health, digital dependency and corruption in the current neoliberal tendencies of economic politics. Slight changes have been made to include digital tools. The guidelines are as follows:

- Materiality and decisions. What is the material makeup of democratic decision-making? Media, props used to decide as many. Do people have to be in one place? Virtual spaces are feasible?
- Timing and breaks. Timing is crucial for assemblies, for the structure of the assembly itself, but also for its formation: When to get together? What kind of events trigger the getting together of the many? Too short, too long. Urgency, boredom. How will time be managed?
- Blockade and panic. What is the possible shift in power relations, e.g., police forces and protesters, or what are the implications of the digital domain?
- Vogue and Voodoo. What are the ceremonial dimensions of gathering? How do the trance-like states come about that are sometimes experienced when coming together as many?
- Sound, systems and voices. How is an assembly constructed by voices, sound? How could this have an impact on the previous question?
- Affects and documents. Contemporary image production and distribution are driven and rescripted by social movements.
- Real fictions. When do we consider ourselves to be many? To assemble in new fashions often feels as if one is engaging in some kind of real fiction: just made up but entirely real (“The Art of Being Many”, 2016, pp.24-28).

One last important aspect to briefly cover collective activism is the nonviolent practice. Butler (2015, p.187) makes a clear and simple description of how violence should be approached: “Nonviolent resistance requires a body that appears, that acts, and that in its action seeks to constitute a different world from the one it encounters, and that means encountering violence without re-producing its terms”. This statement can be taken to a non-physical dimension where instead of bodies one should speak about rhetoric. In this sense, nonviolent resistance is about a rhetoric that aims to change the world without reproducing violence when it is confronted.

Integrating all the aspects discussed so far is a great challenge. From here on in, a model to unify these ideas and practices is offered to put things in perspective and to facilitate the analysis and production of a solid proposal to exercise collective activism.

MODELING DIGITAL STRUCTURES

The relations between global, state and collective views are illustrated in Figure 1. The model helps to visualize the analyzed phenomena of social control, state and individual sovereignty, and collectives as agents of sociopolitical change.



Figure 1. Model of social control, sovereignty and collectives influencing each other.

It is important to note that collective activism has, at various points in history, shaped their immediate local state context or a broader area beyond the nation in which the protest initiated. Popular movements have the potential to spread their principles and ideologies even if originated by individuals (Butler, 2015, p.169).

On the other hand, the current globalization leading forces that support neoliberal governments, or vice versa, are the spheres surrounding and *regulating* social movements or more importantly human agency (Heron, 2008). Thus, the model in Figure 1 conveys these dynamic relationships and sense of containment of governing powers and individuals.

Similarly, a visual representation of the guidelines for assembly of the many within the collective activism sphere of Figure 1, is presented in Figure 2 in order to continue constructing a framework for a practice of artistic gathering.

In addition, the model presented in Figure 2 takes into account the digital domain, i.e., the implementation of digital technologies as means to support the collectives prior, during and after the activism takes place. Materiality will then include hardware devices, connections, software and so on; the timing and breaks can be managed by synchronized digital agendas; the blockade and panic managed by GPS and other online geographical data, e.g., google maps; vogue and voodoo supported by psychoacoustics driven by the sound system and voices through audio software; affects and documents hosted in online platforms of dynamic and collaborative content; and real fictions also supported by augmented or virtual reality. Within the digital perspective, a form of performative collective activism *installation* is proposed. #Unsozials is a project with a presentation format of interactive media installation, focusing on performative aspects similar to works like Remote X by Rimini Protokoll (Kaegi, Karrenbaue, n.d.).

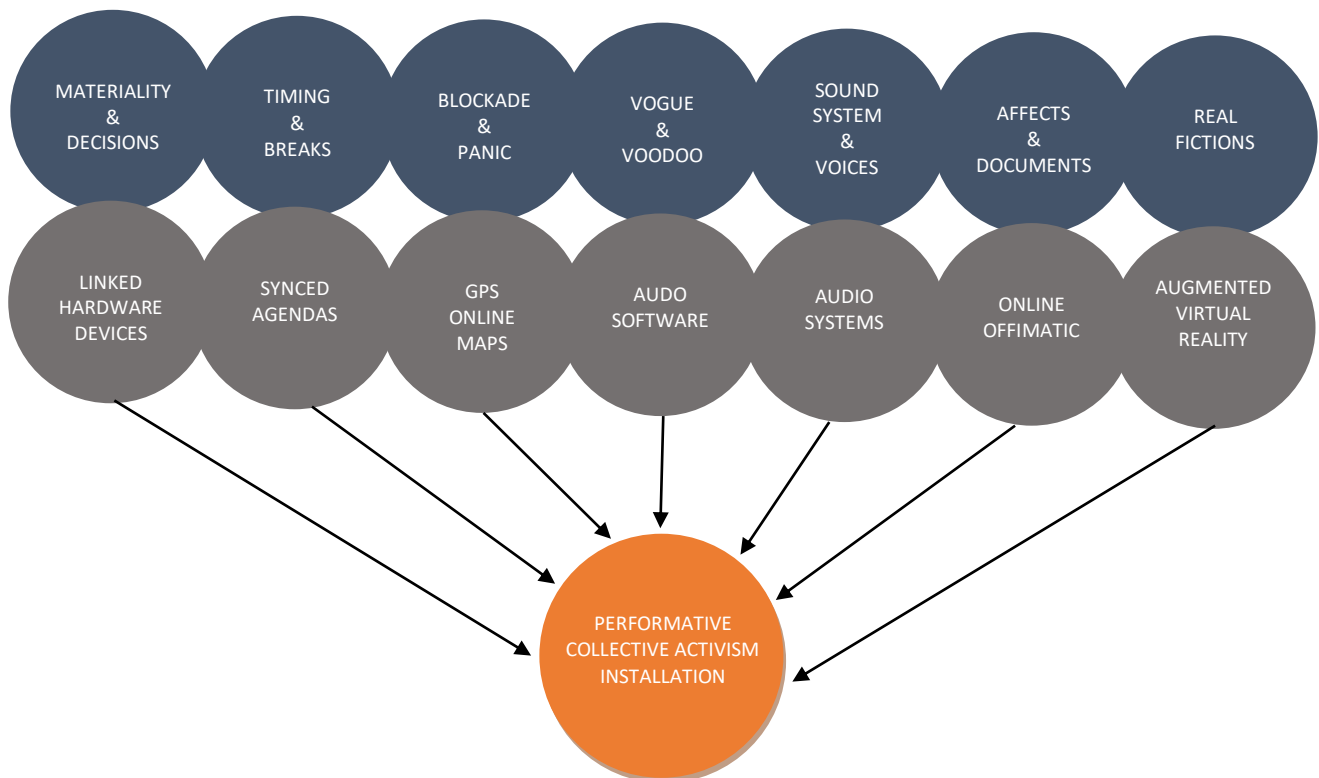


Figure2. Model of guidelines and digital aspects defining a performative installation for collective activism.

#UNSOZIALS

#Unsozials is a representation of a utopian neo liberal paradox consisting of the interplay of optics, video mapping and live interactive audiovisuals. The utopian fictional background concept and narrative go as follows:

By the year 2050, humans will start experiencing a rare evolutionary shift amidst the most profound neoliberal-economic crisis in human history. Unregulated food industry, e.g. transgenics, pesticides and animal mistreatment will have its consequences on global health. A large and non-precedented growing number of humans will be suffering some form of perceptual dysfunction related to cardiovascular diseases and brain lesions caused by a stroke. Structural changes will be made in order to make wayfinding and interaction possible. However, some people will suffer additional disabilities due to strain on the spinal cord, inflicted by continuous abnormal movements, or by accidents resulting from abnormal interaction with the surrounding environment. All physical aspects set aside, a deeper phenomenon will go unnoticed.

With an increasing population among every social status experiencing perceptual shifts, the understanding of social interaction changed as well. This new breed of humans started to challenge inner structures. #Unsozials, as they became known, are disconnected, unconcerned, unembodied cells of disperse thinking. Fragmented disparity within homogeneous local control, is a problem for governments trying to spread globalization. It's the ultimate organic conflict within a system. It's the natural and perpetual fight for individual freedom.

How would they make a difference in the social controlled networked structures?

A first approach of this project was realized in February 2018 in a small presentation that implemented the IPOP framework reference to enhance the overall experience. The use of IPOP influences the participants to raise their awareness

about the issues presented (Pekarik, Schreiber, Hanemann, Richmond & Moel, 2014). The project showed light on how to improve many aspects of the installation, but the engagement of the participants and attention to the issues at hand were very positive.

The installation consisted of a chain of activities designed to make the participants feel empathy for the condition of the #Unsozials. To feel like an #Unsozial meant to become aware of the negative impacts of the neoliberal policies and globalization on our freedoms and individual sovereignty.

DISCUSSION AND FURTHER WORK

The practice of gathering and collective activism has been evolving to a wide variety of creative forms that protest about countless injustices around the world. These issues range from basic human rights violations to the affection of the natural balance of the planet. It seems that if no protests were made, the reigning clashing powers would have achieved irreversible damages many years ago.

This work focuses on forms for keeping social alert, because the mechanisms to maintain the society unaware of the most important issues, are very much present in the agenda of social control. The unstoppable development of technology shall be implemented in newer forms of protesting in order to counteract the current political apparatus capable of meddling into our personal spaces.

#Unsozials proposes the use of interactive installations as a mean to do collective activism. It could be by bringing technology to the public spaces, or it could also be by bringing the public to a specific private physical space where the interactive protest is taking place. Furthermore, as established in "The Art of Being Many" (2016), the activism can exist also in combined virtual and physical spaces where *digital media* would take one of the top roles.

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