Virtual Im___mobilities: Three Ethnographic Examples of Socialised Media Usage, Civic Empowerment and Coded Publics

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Berthold Brecht seems to intriguingly anticipate the reality of today's social media – be it *Twitter*, *Instagram* or *Facebook* – where every user receiving a message is just one click away from socially sharing its content with a good many "others". At the beginning of the 1930s when Brecht developed his *radio theory*, he did not think of a radio as just a nice little gadget, but envisioned a truly revolutionary potential that this media technology might bear:

[T]he radio has only one side where it should have two. It is an apparatus of distribution, it merely allocates. Now, in order to become positive – that is, to find out about the positive side of radio broadcasts – here is a suggestion for changing the function of the radio: transform it from an apparatus of distribution into an apparatus of communication. The radio could inarguably be *the best apparatus of communication in public life,* an enormous system of channels – provided it saw itself as *not only a sender but also a receiver*. This means making the listener not only listen but also speak; not to isolate him but *to place him in relation to others*. (Brecht 1967, 129; emphasis mine)[1]

If we consider the public to be an important part of any democratic society, one can easily imagine that such a "conception-come-true" would indeed bring along tremendous political consequences. Brecht's model of broadcasting would revolutionise the texture of medialized politics: externally governed subjects metamorphosing into *self-determined citizens*. What had at that time been a monolithic, centralised and state-controlled monopoly of mass communication – Brecht called media usage "propaganda" (132) – could become a pluralistic, decentralised and democratic net of competing political thoughts and opinions. In 1932, this idea of a technology that places people "in relation to others" instead of "isolating" them seemed very Utopian. And today?

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1 | The translation is from Niels Werber (2003, 233).

Looking briefly at the contemporary German social science literature, for example, shows that academia also – at least partly – shares the Brechtian idea of the empowering potential of (now) digital media: Whether it is "Democracy 3.0" (Meisselbach 2009), "E-Participation" (Sarcinelli 2012) or "NETIZENS" (Leggewie 2010), political scientists often suggest the positive effect that digital media technologies might have for democracy and civil society. Here, the barely 20-year-old assumption of individuals' separation from community matters (Putnam 1995) seems rather outdated, having been replaced by the notion of a new civic mobilisation, which, in turn, has been enabled through a new type of media technology. This is frequently explained by the emergence of, as Manuel Castells (2007) has framed it, a distinctive new type of "socialised communication" that such media brings along. It is "self-generated in content, self-directed in emission, and self-selected in reception *by many* that communicate *with many*" (Castells 2007, 248; emphasis mine).[2] In fact, there are 3,079,339,857 globally networked media users today (Internet World Stats 2015) who keep sending and receiving incredible amounts of information through their keyboards, smartphones and webcams; 844,000,000 mobile *Facebook* users who communicate in virtual spaces while, simultaneously, moving from one place to another physically (Facebook 2015); and more than 5,000,000 tweets (USSEC 2013) are sent out into the digital ether – day after day after day. Civic power, open access and free flows of information are at the ethic core of contemporary narratives of digital democracies. Just as the equation of the now dominating mobility paradigm (Sheller and Urry 2006) often indicates that – almost by default – mobility equals freedom, *virtual mobility* through the usage of contemporary digital media technologies is supposed to lead to *political freedom* as in "empowerment", "participation" and "inclusion". Yet, what does such socialised communication look like if we approach today's intersections of media and politics from the micro perspective of cultural anthropology? Do digital media technologies really open up new paths of democratic participation?

MEDIA, POWER AND DEMOCRACY: ETHNOGRAPHIES OF SOCIALISED COMMUNICATION

The term "virtual mobility" – for the purpose of this article defined broadly as access to digital media technologies, meaning both hardware and software – usually transports the notion (Kenyon 2006) that such novel technologies enable someone to do something (e.g. access to education at a foreign university) that might otherwise not be available in equal measure through other types of mobility (e.g. a restriction to physical mobility due to the lack of a visa). In the field of politics, virtual mobility can, thus, be defined as *enhanced access to political power through*

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[2] | It should be noted that Castells is not one of those apologists.

digital media technology usage. Rather than sharing a Utopian perception of social-ised communication and instead of looking at the macro level of millions of acts of communication, this chapter seeks to have a differentiated ethnographic look at the realities of virtual mobility in such fields by also taking into account the op-posite phenomenon: "virtual immobility".[3] The analysis draws on qualitative field work conducted within three local political contexts. Research on civic practices was carried out in Germany, Israel and Spain, on-site as well as online, over several months. The methodology consisted of three elements: network analysis, partici-pant observation and discourse analysis of a broad range of media contents (e. g. *Facebook*, *Twitter*, newspapers, online magazines).

It seems obvious that the briefness of an article may only allow an initial glimpse of today's socially medialized spaces of micropolitics – a spotting of phe-nomena, so to speak. Consequently, the aim cannot and will not be to provide gen-eral answers to a global question. As Daniel Miller and his colleagues have shown with their *Global Social Media Impact Study*, "anthropological global generaliza-tions" are quite difficult tasks (quoted in Miller 2015). This is not only true because social media platforms in China are different from, let us say, the ones in Turkey. Even more important is Miller's ethnographically driven insight that *Facebook* in Trinidad actually differs from *Facebook* in Great Britain *not* because the technolo-gy is different – *Facebook* shares the same technical features and interface in both countries – but because the local *media culture* of its users differs in each context (Miller 2011). Social media is not only about technology, but also about its cultural practices. Keeping this valuable lesson in mind, the following three ethnographic examples are not supposed to produce global assumptions of media, politics and power by claiming a strict comparison of cases. Each of the three ethnographic vignettes addresses a separate research question empirically exploring the daily life worlds of politically engaged individuals within a specific democratic context: citizens who negotiate, deal with and struggle for political power through digital media technology usage within their particular "multimedia symbolic environ-ment" (Castells 1996, 394–406).

In Israel, the ethnographic vignette will be about public space, media politics and virtual empowerment. The focus of research was on a party list in Tel Aviv called *City for All*. Its political activists seek to put aside the all-dominating na-tional conflict with the Palestinians on the municipal level, and to fight jointly for sustainable city policies beyond all ethnical, religious and social boundaries. This

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3 | Virtual immobility is sometimes referred to as "digital illiteracy". Recently, for example, the Euro-pean Commission (2014) published data suggesting that almost half of the European population has insufficient digital skills and might be labelled "digital illiterate". While the second part of the chapter shows that digital illiteracy may certainly be part of the phenomenon in some cases, political exclu-sion should not be reduced to a lack of knowledge. Consequently, the chapter as a whole argues that there is more to virtual mobility/immobility than this "knowing-how" aspect of digital technology.

section addresses the question, how can digital media transform democratic practices on the local level, while, at the same time, being connected and intermingled with traditionally institutionalised forms of power?

In Spain, political action was explored online and on-site within a social movement: the local branch of the *Plataforma de Afectados por la Hipoteca (PAH)* in Murcia.[4] Its main goal is to prevent the enforcement of evictions which have been ruled and executed by state authorities for more than five years. The *PAH* acts politically both physically and virtually through non-violent occupations of flats and houses, and by providing the necessary legal information to affected families online. The issues at stake here are to what extent does access to digital media technologies empower citizens? Or is there even a new form of *virtual immobility* evolving, which – to the contrary – leads to political exclusion, even broadening the "digital divide" (see, e. g. Friedman 2001; Hindman 2009)?

Finally, in Munich, taking the example of a traditional democratic institution, negotiations of internal party politics within the *Pirate Party (PIRATES)* were analysed. "In the course of the digital revolution of all spheres of life" the party members' vision is to rethink and redo democracy.[5] The guiding research questions for this section were: What regulates, structures and distributes political action within digitized spaces of politics, and how do digital infrastructures invisibly coact with human political agents?

Even though all empirical cases and their contexts are different, a shared analytical perspective will be developed throughout all of the following three sections: Virtual mobility, too, is bounded. Socialised communication within today's so-called "liquid democracies" has structural constraints that set limits and generate opportunities to act. Unlike a fence or a wall that cannot be crossed, its borders are not always visible at first sight. This is why each section tries to uncover such *socially medialized* border zones *of action*, making the digital dimension of a political phenomenon visible. Where do the elements of contrastive pairs such as "inclusion vs. exclusion", "lack of power vs. empowerment" or "participation vs. lack of agency" start empirically, where do they end and where do we have to look to find its shifting boundaries in the light of an omnipresent digitization? Each ethnographic example demonstrates *how* today's novel media technologies might shape political spaces and actions, yet always in a very distinct manner producing a concrete power structure, which might lead to civic empowerment, but also bears the risks of new forms of exclusion.

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4 | The translation would be something like "platform for all people affected by mortgage" (resp. by the "mortgage crisis").

5 | They explicitly define this in their manifesto (Piratenpartei 2013a).

"THIS IS A PUBLIC PLACE!" POLYMEDIA AND THE PRIVILEGE OF INSTITUTIONALISED POWER

Well before the internet existed – or at least before it had its commercial break-through – residents of Tel Aviv had fought against what they called the "privatiza-tion of public space". The areas close to the city's beaches have often been the cause and subject of these struggles. Due to their central location close to the sea, these spaces not only appear fairly attractive for the outdoor activities of city dwellers, they are also valuable real estate.

The Israeli Rachel Gilad-Wallner has been a political activist for several dec-ades. She was one of the city council members of the party list *City For All* in 2013, a list aiming to bridge national parties' political differences on the municipal level. In October that year, Rachel was taking a walk to the harbour of Tel Aviv – "on public space" as she emphasised several times – when she, all of a sudden, spotted "a private event".[6] The whole area was closed off and someone had ordered security guards. Being "a citizen of Tel Aviv", she did not want to "put up with this intolera-ble event" and confronted the organisers. Being physically *there* – at a *place* repre-senting what she considered to be "public space" – and digitally equipped with the video camera of her tablet, she recorded the following discussion:

Rachel [filming]: "Citizens of Tel Aviv, please, all of you look how our *accessibility* to pass here is blocked by these two giant men, because there is a wedding of the rich! This wedding is taking place here, and it's *against the law!*"
A security guard: "Hey lady, what do you care? Ten minutes and this is over."
Rachel: "No! I want *to know* whose wedding this is! I couldn't get married here, and this is *a public place!*" (City For All 2013b, emphasis and translation mine)[7]

Rachel's demands to respect *open access* to a *public place* and *transparency* of any events that might happen there, as well as the adherence to the *rule of law* and its principle of *equality*, are not novel themes in politics. Indeed, they represent traditional democratic values. However, what is novel here is the particular shape of the media culture, and the way such values, respectively their breaches, were addressed. Rachel's *on-site* confrontation of the wedding was uploaded to a social media video platform by *City For All*, and subsequently shared *online* through a set of channels (e. g. *Twitter*, *Facebook*, e-mail). And yet, the linked *YouTube* video was just a tiny facet of socially medialized micropolitics. As a matter of fact, the social

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6 | All case studies in this article were composed from the author's field work diaries. Direct quota-tions are usually "marked". Hyperlinks, to the extent that they exist, were added to all media contents.
7 | I first heard about this particular controversy on *Twitter* while I was doing field work during the 2013 city council elections' campaign of *City For All*. The video can still be watched on *YouTube* (City For All 2013b). Even without knowing any Hebrew, one can tell that Rachel was quite outraged.

media were just the beginning of this controversy. Mobile technologies *enabled* Rachel to start doing politics, but they did not automatically bring along political impact. Their original tweet had only two shares (one retweet and one favourite). The video itself is very unprofessional and really hard to watch. Being unbelievably jittery, it was seen by about 300 people receiving two likes. This is not to underestimate the importance of her initial media usage. As a document, the video became a political argument. Using her web-enabled device to shoot and upload it online was the first thing Rachel naturally thought of when she was on-site. It was the most effective way to prove what she considered a breach of democratic values. She did this by drawing on the latest contemporary media technology personally available to her, by making use of means of media production that were formerly available only to professionals. Rachel's case, thus, offers an illustrative example of how media technology gets appropriated to (firstly) become mobile virtually. Yet, if *City For All* had stuck solely to social media and had not broadened their strategy using other channels of communication as well, the story would have most likely stopped at that point. It did not, because *City For All* decided to hook up to a different type of media channel by informing newspapers and TV stations.[8] This is when traditional and institutionalised mass media entered the political stage interconnecting two different realms of media. What made this incident particularly compatible to mass media interest was its public outcry factor. As things turned out, the groom did not only close off a public place, but he also happened to be the son of a well-off Tel Avivian hotel owner. He was, as Rachel put it, "more than a 'normal' citizen", because he and his father were "closely tied up with the political establishment". This "well-off son" was celebrating a *private* wedding on *public* ground. Rachel's assumption proved right. Mass media would bite the bait addressing this controversy several times. But there is more to it: Being a formal party list and having city council members, *City For All* wired up a third line of communication using formally institutionalised politics. As a councillor, Rachel had the legal authority to introduce a bill to the respective city council committee demanding a rigorous, legal prohibition of the use of public areas for purely private purposes. This third channel of discourse paving its way into the city's space of politics seemed to have taken place far from any virtual channels: it was injected on paper, through a committee sitting and discussing the matter in a small dusky room in Tel Aviv city hall. However, at the same time, it was inseparably connected with digital media, because one of its council members had not only been *there* when the incident happened, but was also able to prove this physical and personal experience with her multimedia recording. Now, how are we to understand this *political space of medialized communication* within Tel Avivian city politics conceptually?

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8 | One of *City For All*'s tweets, for example, (City For All 2013a) contains a hyperlink to the news coverage of *Haaretz,* one of Israel's most important newspapers.

Drawing on ethnographic examples from a comparative migration study of Filipino and Caribbean transnational families, Mirca Madianou and Daniel Miller (2012) have made similar observations in their book, pointing out that media practices are not and have never been "monomedia". The shape of today's media culture is *polymedia* – precisely what the micro-ethnography above has shown. The distinction between "real" and "virtual" has become increasingly blurred, finding expression in a broad net of medialized actions. We might still use the differentiation "real/virtual" for analytical purposes, but it does not make any sense ontologically. Reality exists as *hybridity* (de Souza e Silva 2006). Political action happens as much on-site as it does online, and these two spheres are mutually interlocked in many ways, so are virtual mobility and other forms of mobilities.[9] Understanding this spatial hybridity of reality seems central to any contemporary media ethnography of politics. Studying mobilities should pay attention to its virtuality and vice versa.[10] What does all of this mean with regards to power?

It became evident in the Tel Aviv example that locally produced and socially medialized information is mobile across the boundaries of different media. This cross-media mobility of sharing information and the powerful resources necessary to mobilise them, both hardware and software, can be necessary to overcome an initial immobility of information, but without alternative channels of political communication such new media capacities might just not make a difference. Rachel was a member of the city council, and the medialized translation from a beach incident into a legal document in the council was due to her *privileged, vertical usage of power* and not due to a socialised, horizontal one. She used a traditional democratic institution. We definitely have to take the polymedia nature of today's medialized world seriously in order not to overestimate the enabling democratic potential of socialised media. Virtual mobility does not generate political *impact* by default, it rather adds another (media technological) point of entry into a political discourse – another *low-threshold layer of potential democratic empowerment*. "Low-threshold", thereby, does not refer to the technical knowledge of using digital technologies, but to the fact that, at least in democratic societies, there is usually no political authority that hinders their usage. The means of media production – to frame this from a Marxist point of view – are easily obtainable. However, as the next section will indicate, new perils of *virtual immobility* are another side of the coin. Reflecting on the relationship between political ability and practical capability, the following empirical example demonstrates that virtual mobility is about the knowledge both *through* technology and *of* (the usage of) technology.

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9 | Marion Hamm (2006) describes the concept of "spatial hybridity of politics" vividly using the example of global protest cultures.

10 | For a good example of the issue of migration, see Kuster, Pieper, and Tsianos (2011).

MORE THAN JUST A LINK! GLOCAL EMPOWERMENT AND TECHNOLOGICAL META-KNOWLEDGE

My first encounter with the *Plataforma de Afectados por la Hipoteca (PAH)* took place in Spring 2013. As on every Tuesday, the *PAH Murcia* had organised its weekly four-hour support meeting in the basement facilities of *La Cruz Roja* – the Murcian *Red Cross*. It was the session of a self-help group for eviction victims.[11] During such *PAH* meetings, often for the first time, people affected get the chance to tell their worries, fears and feelings to each other. The sessions are moderated by political activists. This time, there were about 40 people in the room when an older woman tried to catch the moderator's attention – "tried" because she hardly spoke any Spanish showing a very strong Eastern European accent. One could see that she was desperate. Suddenly, realising that no one could understand her, she helplessly burst out crying. This was one of my first experiences with the *PAH* self-help groups. But what do such meetings have to do with virtual mobility when they take place in a thick-walled room that renders any attempt to access the internet basically impossible? Entering the *Red Cross* building, one could see ten tables and two rows of chairs next to a bunch of lockers. No beamer. No *PowerPoint*. The only other piece of furniture was an old flip chart. Before a session started, activists would point to this flipchart. On it were a mobile phone number, a handwritten updated e-mail address and a "uniform resource locator" – a URL. The website itself was referring to something called *documentos útiles:* useful documents. This is where the digital realm of politics starts. Virtual mobility is not only connected to global spaces – the internet being the most prominent one – but also to local places. Materialised on a piece of paper, *PAH*'s hyperlink on the flip chart symbolises this connection. On the virtual side of this amateurishly looking poster emerges a powerful political weapon: special legal knowledge. The link does not lead to a local Murcian activists' website, but rather it connects individuals from Murcia with a *Wordpress*-based national cyberspace that contains the cumulative collected knowledge of the social movement as a whole – ready to be called up at any time. The empowering potential of this knowledge is so high, because it is so difficult and complicated to fight an imminent eviction in Spain. If a family has trouble paying their mortgage, it is very important to initialise appropriate legal steps at the proper time in the proper sequence. Through many years of locally situated ex-

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11 | *PAH* activists exist in almost every Spanish city. They support the hundreds of thousands people who have been affected by the Spanish housing crises, and who have either lost their homes or – threatened by evictions – might be about to lose them, because they can no longer afford to pay the interest rates on their bank loans. Even if the Spanish government has not yet been able to provide any official figures to assess the overall scope of the many individual tragedies, valid sources suggest that up to 2012, there might have already been up to 400,000 evictions that have been taking place in the shadow of the Euro crisis (Agencia EFE 2012).

periences, the *PAH* has figured out how these social negotiations between a bank, the state and its citizens work effectively. Using their *Wordpress*-based website, they have broken this legal, highly abstract process of an eviction down into a set of easy to handle pieces of information which can be applied by any individual no matter where they are located in Spain, and without being an expert or a specialist in such matters. One can come upon things like a draft for a "letter of information" to send to one's bank, templates containing correctly drafted "letters of objection", or an important piece of advice about how to integrate the latest European Court of Justice's decision, which has just ruled the practices of certain Spanish banks "to be illegal", into a legal dispute. All this can be done by non-professionals doing mostly "copy and paste".

This virtual path is tremendously empowering. It contains the downloadable essence of all political and legal experiences that *PAH* activists from Barcelona to Santiago de Compostella have gone through since 2008. It leads, to put this conceptually, to a *glocal network of information* which provides a special type of knowledge that can – and in the case of the *PAH* often does –empower citizens successfully through media cultural practices. Barry Wellman's concept of "glocal networks" (2002) helps one to grasp a notion of such a civic and socially medialized space that has just been described. This information network, while possessing *global, regional or national connections*, still has a form of *local situatedness.* Because "[t]he Internet", as Wellman puts it, "both provides a ramp onto the global information highway and *strengthens local links* within neighborhoods and households" (Wellman 2002, 13; emphasis mine). The key to understanding this connection is the particular mediation of knowledge which novel media technologies enable, and which may be utilised politically, as the *PAH* example demonstrates. Thus, the people affected do indeed find *documentos útiles.* The latter protect them from being evicted. The provision of special legal knowledge might make the difference between living with your neighbours and friends or – at worst – ending in trage-dy.[12] In Spain, this kind of knowledge is not provided by the state, but rather by a

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12 | These *PAH* self-help groups almost always unveil social and psychological hardships which are incredibly sad to listen to and expose the abysses of a society: a 50-year-old Spanish father crying like a little child, physically breaking down in front of 38 strangers. Firstly, he had lost his job. Since he could no longer pay the interest rates on the mortgage on his house, his parents agreed to use their own mortgage to cover his debt. But their son still could not afford to pay the exploding rates. Ulti-mately, he ended up not only losing his own home, but his parents were also evicted from their house. Other cases involved a young mother who had been living with two small children in her flat without any water or electricity for more than a year and an old man threatening to shoot himself if he really lost his house. All three stories mentioned were told to me during my ethnographic encounters with the *PAH* in the basement of the *Red Cross*. In Spain, the people affected during the process of an evic-tion *(un desahucio)* quite frequently commit suicide. On the one hand, this has probably something to do with "feeling ashamed" about their own situation, as activists have stated many times. On the

glocally networked social movement whose activists not only do politics in their local neighbourhoods (e.g. by "occupying houses"),[13] but also on a regional (e.g. "organizing demonstrations"), national (e.g. "internal coordination") and European level (e.g. "lobby work at EU institutions").[14] The legal information provided by the *PAH* was, thereby, openly accessible and it could take effect if one knew where to find it and how to use it. The amounts of data were rather small. All you needed was a temporary internet access point, and the formats of all shared documents were widely distributed. Nevertheless, the people affected quite often had problems and difficulties related to issues of technology, because they could not open, find or print a document. Activists of the *PAH* had to constantly provide this technological knowledge: they had to deal with outdated software, the poor design of their own website or a difficult usage of hardware. If we shift our focus from the "citizens as users" to the "citizens as producers" of this glocal network of information, the point becomes even more obvious. Whether to handle *Wordpress* correctly perhaps to upload a new "letter of objection", to edit an appealing and educational video for *YouTube* or to administrate the local *Facebook* group, polymedialized work was always a central part of the activists doing politics.[15] Such mediation of this type of media competence seems to be essential to virtual mobility – a key competence, so to speak – if the emergence of a new form of discrimination is to be avoided: political exclusion through "digital illiteracy".

It is not that the peril of virtual immobility is akin to a direct consequence of somewhat exceedingly complicated technologies. The argument is not about any technological determinism. Concluding with the initial example of the older Eastern European woman who could not express herself in Spanish might clarify this point. In the meeting described, the *PAH* finally managed to help her, but it was when another Bulgarian participant present at the meeting started translating. Only then could the poor woman tell about her eviction case, and the activists managed to provide her with the relevant information. Before, they were just not

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other hand, it might also be due to the fact that evictions in Spain are particularly hard. A personal insolvency law does not exist in Spain (as of November 2014). Once evicted, affected citizens not only physically lose their home, but also have to pay off the debt. Now the bank's property, this "home" is transformed into "real estate" again. Sometimes shelterless and often without a job, these evicted people are supposed to continue paying off their loan to their bank while their (former) house usually remains empty.

13 | I have written a short but sad ethnography showing such local activities of *neighbourhood politics* for the *Transformations* magazine (Kunzelmann 2014).

14 | Even the "global" applies here, since the *PAH* helps many citizens from Latin American countries who are also quite often affected by evictions in Spain. In Murcia, for example, the local activists work together closely with the Ecuadorian consulate.

15 | In a way, the *PAH* activists represent something similar to the prototype of a political media entrepreneur.

able to understand what she was trying to say. Or, to change perspectives, she was not *capable* of expressing herself using the appropriate medium – in this case, the Spanish *language*. At first sight, this seems to have nothing to do with digitization. At second thought, the example gives a valuable hint. Just as language – being a medium as well – has to be learned, using and applying digital media can be learned, and has to be appropriated. Glocal medialized spaces of politics do not, by default, generate democratic participation. Empowering civic practices may occur within such spaces, as the example of the *PAH* network of information has proven. However, new possibilities of failing also exist. Just as language has to be practiced to empower individuals to express themselves, virtual mobility does not come by birth. The more important the usage of digital media technology becomes, the more urgent "digital literacy" becomes: the acquisition of *a technological meta-knowledge*. The novel technological layers of potential democratic empowerment, which were also described in the last section, may be low-threshold, and compared to the access to means of media production that existed just a few decades ago, it certainly is, but such new media technologies *do have* a threshold for potential political exclusion. As the following section will show, the digital infrastructures that compose these layers of action also bring a different kind of co-agency with them. There is something underneath the wires and glass fibres that acts. Let us open the "black box code".

"MY SOFTWARE DID THIS?" CODED PUBLICS AND THE INFRASTRUCTURES OF VIRTUAL MOBILITIES

The party convention of the Bavarian *PIRATES*. Unterhaching, a small town close to Munich. 4:30 pm. 12 January 2013. The setting: a small, ill-lit rural gym normally used for basketball. About 100 participants. Lively. Noisy. Somebody yells, asking for silence. Tables and chairs are packed with digital equipment. Cables, speakers, laptops, mobile phones everywhere. A huge screen on a provisional gallery shows the latest agenda item. A crew of technicians – also party members – live streams the happening, so that all *PIRATES* who did not physically make it into the gym are still able to keep up to date. The official aim of the party convention is to take a vote on the party's programme and to decide on its political positions.

One of the most heated debates flared up when members were supposed to vote on a position paper called "Game Changer: Neutral Societal Platform".[16] This draft, which finally got accepted with a tiny majority, was against any affirmative action for women, justifying its position by arguing that "female quotas" would not eliminate the reason for social injustice, but only treat its symptoms. In addi-

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16 | In German it was called "Gamechanger: Neutrale gesellschaftliche Plattform" (Piratenpartei 2013b) – just as cryptic as in English.

tion to all the loud and "buzzy" debates that were taking place either through the stage's microphone or simply by yelling across the tables, another "sp@cial" layer of discussion existed where *PIRATES* could simultaneously argue and exchange opinions – *Twitter*. In order to understand politics in all its media dimensions – in this case: the shaping of internal party opinions – one cannot simply ignore this channel of debate. The use of *Twitter* produced something similar to a *locally situated simultaneousness* during the ongoing discussions. Space and place overlapped each other. The party members were physically and virtually present at the same time, discussing across the tables, while discussing on a digital medium.[17] The opinion-forming process was again polymedia, but there was something else to it. Next to acting party members, there was another form of co-agency that had an impact on the *PIRATES* micropolitical spaces of the party event. It was something hidden deep down in the infrastructure which enabled the simultaneous *Twitter* discussions, featuring another media cultural dimension that can be framed as *meta-mediality based on code*. This terminology refers to the structuring elements that reside behind optical fibre cables, touch-screens and data processing centres. Adrian Mackenzie's (2006) concept of "software-like situations" will be used to illustrate this dimension. In *Cutting Code: Software and Sociality*, he addresses a very specific type of social configuration that might be subsumed as human-interface-relations.[18] Beyond any technicism, he asks what type of agency is produced through the use of software and whether this could also represent something similar to an operating system of social action. Mackenzie does not conceive software and its structuring code as an abstractly defined (mathematical) set of operations, but embeds them into social and cultural situations:

Software in its specificity is not a given. What software does is very intimately linked with *how* code is read and *by whom or what,* that is, by person or machine. Sociologists and anthropologists of technology have established that any formalization needs to be understood *"in use"*. (Mackenzie 2006, 6; emphasis mine)

Any time an interaction involves the use of software, one could sum up his concept: code *pre- or co-structures* this action to a certain degree. Code is culturally "in use".

This fragment of a source code is from the interactive democracy software *LiquidFeedback*, which is sometimes used by the *PIRATES* to shape internal party

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17 | The hashtag "#lptby" was used to create this supplementary, common sp@ce of online discussions.
18 | Mackenzie's concept is more specific with regards to digital media than, for example, Actor-Network Theory-based approaches which are usually applied in such technological contexts, and may contain *any* human-non-human network whatsoever – e. g. even cars and batteries (Callon 1986).

opinions. It defines – to put it simply – *how* the software calculates the weighting of votes (PSG-Berlin 2014):[19]

Line	source
152	if (logging && candidates[i].score < 1.0 && !candidates[i].seat) log_candidate = 1;
153	if (log_candidate) printf("Score for suggestion #%s = %.4f+%.4f*%.4f", candidates[i].key, candidates[i].score, scale, candidates[i].score_per_step);
154	if (candidates[i].score_per_step > 0.0) {
155	double max_scale;
156	max_scale = (1.0-candidates[i].score) / candidates[i].score_per_step;
157	if (max_scale == scale) {
158	// score of 1.0 should be reached, so we set score directly to avoid floating point errors:
159	candidates[i].score = 1.0;

Mackenzie's concept helps us to understand the cultural dimension of these abstract symbols distinguishing between four elements that define any software-like situation: *code*, *originators*, *recipients* and *prototypes* (2006, 11–16).

"Code" symbolises more than the semantics and syntax of a computer language. It is a "direct expression of human agency in relation to things", precisely because it does not remain formal or abstract, but really *acts:* something does "start", "move" or "stop" (10; emphasis mine). Code is also part of a wider net of social relations, while, in turn, defining these relations in a specific manner itself. Being executed – .exe – it may then change this very composition. To bring back the code fragment mentioned above: it defines "if (logging && candidates[i].score < *1.0* && !candidates[i].seat)", and it does *not* define "if (logging && candidates[i].score < *50.0* && !candidates[i].seat)". Of course, the symbols "< 1.0" or "< 50.0" represent a formal and abstract relation between things, but being *social symbols* as well, they actually define the weighting of votes and, as such, democratic practices. Once *used*, they change the internal power relation of a group of individuals – in this case, of a political party. Code "as a *material*" has then become "a significant way of distributing agency" (8; emphasis mine).

"Originators" is the second element of Mackenzie's concept. It describes that code does not usually act independently. Software needs someone (a person/actor) or something (a machine/actant) to write, programme and update it.

"Recipients", thirdly, refers to the fact that, in software-like situations, actors or actants always either *do code* (someone votes) or *get done by code* (someone gets voted on).

Conclusively, the word "prototypes" implies that software resembles a set of operations ideally "representing something else" – which is not code. This seems a

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[19] | Even though *LiquidFeedback* was not used during the party convention described, it seems suitable to illustrate the argument.

little cryptic, but it means basically that, *as a prototype*, software embodies virtually a social arrangement with its corresponding set of rules. It could be a specific electoral procedure, or – to draw on Mackenzie's example of an image editing software – "a photographic workshop equipped with instruments such as scissors, brushes, pencils and paint" (16).

To the recipients who *do LiquidFeedback*, the lines of code mentioned above, which have been discussed and programmed by the originators way ahead of the event, are *at work* "unconsciously" during the actual voting process. One may even say "automatically". Or to frame it with Mackenzie again:

What is visible to a programmer working on a piece of software may be almost totally invisible to users, who only see code *mediated* through an interface or some change in their environment: the elevator arrives, the television changes channels, the telephone rings. (13; emphasis mine)

One cannot argue that code does not have an effect. *LiquidFeedback* is used by *PIRATES* to vote and, thus, ultimately, to decide. During the course of voting, a specific weighting of votes is used while many different procedures are ruled out. Code is *not* the election, but it defines a prototype that co-structures the actual acts of voting. In this sense, software possesses a form of "*secondary* agency (…) supporting or extending the agency of some primer agent" (8; emphasis mine).

The very same thing, which a recipient experiences as infrastructure or interface, symbolises something fundamentally different to the originator. For the latter it is a *medium* based on code that can be *charged culturally* – and, thus, politically – in many ways, depending on the procedures that a programmer inscribes into its fabric. Once the originator writes a line of code within a political context, for example, the prototype of a voting procedure, they define a precise instruction to *do politics* which primary agents cannot simply ignore.

Virtual mobility does not occur within empty spaces that lack any structure of power. Secondary agency exists in every human-interface situation occurring within digitally medialized spaces of politics – whenever we touch a display to read a *Facebook* message. Thus, as the ethnographic example suggests, we seem bound to take software-like situations into account once we decide to analyse today's media culture – not only within political contexts. Yet, this "black box code" remains strikingly untouched in qualitative social science. Too formal? Too abstract? Too complicated? Only at first glance. If we open our eyes and focus on software-like situations *in use*, behind those cold wired infrastructures appears another structural element of power: code. Such *coded publics* also define borders and boundaries for political actors, ultimately enabling or constraining their virtual mobility.

VIRTUAL IM___MOBILITIES: A CONCLUSION

The three ethnographic sections have illustrated that digital media are neither a radio technology, nor can everyone use them on an equal footing. Just imagine if each and every one of today's 2,802,478,934 internet users had their own radio frequency through which he or she could broadcast, which channel would you select?

This article has used three ethnographical examples of micropolitics from Murcia, Tel Aviv and Munich to demonstrate the relationship between technology, media culture and politics. It was argued that virtual mobility is as much about privilege as it is about inclusion; it is as much about participation as it is about a hidden co-agency of purposely programmed infrastructures. Democratic micro-realities are really in a state of flux, but boundless they are not – rather, complex, resistive and multilayered. Borders, barriers and boundaries still exist in today's virtual mobile world. What has changed is their specific cyber-technological and media cultural fabric. It was the purpose of this chapter to try to unfold such shifts. Thus, it was never about technology as technology, but rather about the place and space contemporary media technologies take up within political contexts.

The Israeli case study, which described a local political struggle about a public place at the harbour of Tel Aviv, has shown that today's spaces of politics are polymedia and hybrid. As was the case with *City For All*, political action gets channelled through a variety of media, on-site as well as online. It goes from a public place to social media to mass media, while also integrating traditional, institutionalised – and quite privileged – medialized power practices. "Real" and "virtual" spheres of action might be *analytically* distinguishable, but they are *de facto* manifoldly interlocked. To paraphrase the philosopher Gilles Deleuze (2002), the real is the virtual and the virtual is the real. Any contemporary media ethnography should take the concepts of polymedia and hybridity seriously. If not, it might just miss an important structural part of political power, and declare something to be "blurred", while actually doing the blurring itself.

The second example has addressed the field of tension between knowledge *through* technology and knowledge *of* (the usage of) technology. Using an example of ethnographic research in Murcia, the glocal network of information of the *Plataforma de Afectados por la Hipoteca (PAH)* was analysed to reflect on the relationship between virtual im/mobility and political ex/inclusion. Here, political action consisted of both *doing media* as well as providing knowledge and understanding about (effectively) *using media*. In the case of the *PAH*, knowledge mediated through new media technologies has indeed generated a way of civic empowerment, and it has lead to an increase in democratic participation, since many people formerly affected became political activists after or during their own process of eviction. However, digital media might also produce a novel form of potential political exclusion that has to be taken seriously. Any information, for

example, that was conveyed through the *PAH* network – from "local" to "global" and back – has required a special type of (meta-)information that was somewhat *co-conveyed*: *meta-knowledge* of the usage of media technology. In order to be able to use media, one has to be capable of using it. Political ability and practical capability are two sides of the same coin. Virtual mobility needs digital literacy.

The third and final empirical section of this analysis has illustrated what can be labelled *meta-mediality based on code*. This dimension of media culture refers to the structuring of often invisible elements that reside behind today's infrastructures and interfaces. Applying the concept of "software-like situations" by Adrian Mackenzie on a third German empirical case study in Munich – a party convention of the *PIRATES* – laid open another emerging layer of medialized micropolitics: a locally situated yet virtual space of discussion. Using this space, individuals could argue and exchange political opinions online, while simultaneously debating on-site. The relation of this third section to the examples of contemporary media culture described previously seems almost trivial, but every social medium (e. g. *Twitter*, *Facebook*, *WhatsApp*) and every digital technology (e. g. *Wordpress*, tablets) is based on code, and is, thus, co-structured by this *meta*-mediality. What we read in, let us say, a political *Facebook* group discussing gender issues, is neither natural nor coincidence. For everything we read or see, there is something we do not read or see. Who or what decides what we read or see?

Today's spaces of politics are still media-culturally structured. Socialised communication does not just flow freely. What we term "social media", "digital technologies" and "virtual mobility" create a specific polymedia and hybrid fabric that might enable new ways of democratic participation and empowerment. However, at the same time, this very texture also defines possible new ways of failing: virtual immobility and, thus, at worst, political exclusion. As political practices become increasingly technologised and medialized, these perils will grow. Coded publics, thus, become a question of democracy. Equally, if humans are able to locally hook up their consciousness into a simultaneously existing online space of discussion, getting virtually mobile and effectively mediatising their political views and values in a "twofold" way, what about those who are not capable of doing so, be it because of a lack of technological knowledge (cf. second ethnographic section), due to an infrastructural breakdown ("no WiFi") or even for political reasons?[20] The more prominent coded and socially medialized publics become, the more relevant such questions will be.

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20 | Taking the example of the *Twitter Trends Algorithm,* Tarleton Gillespie (2011) illustrates how meta-mediality based on code takes effect as an object of politics itself, showing the magnitude of discursive power it might unfold.

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