

## "Changing the Very Logic of Communication"

Interview with Brian Holmes

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by Oliver Vodeb

Oliver Vodeb: Understanding of the communications environment, knowledge and mastering of communications approaches are crucial for the survival of such opposing parties as corporations and the citizen. Could we say that the most interesting communication approaches are born within the sphere of conflict between the commercial discourse and the opposing activist, non-commercial discourse, since this is the point with the highest communicational tension?

Brian Holmes: That was the great game that emerged in the nineties, when contagious, improvisational subvertising appeared on the walls and in the new electronic media, to challenge what seemed to be the totally dominant practices of global branding. The graphic designer and the street-party revolutionary stood up against the advertising creative and the CEO, while the hacker clubs were launching their viruses into the coded heart of Microsoft. It's the stuff myths are made of. And it's still happening in extremely positive ways - check out [chainworkers.org](http://chainworkers.org), for example. But whether it's the most interesting approach depends a lot on what you mean by "communication." At a certain level culture-jamming becomes a kind of virtuoso sport, declining into late Adbusters, and you start to see the mirror-image relation between the two opposing teams, sparring for the excitement and prestige of manipulating people's emotions. Then the corporations start to produce truly grotesque things, like Shell going ecological in the wake of the Brent Spar controversy, or BP rebranding itself as "Beyond Petroleum" - a whole complex of greenwashing strategies that Eveline Lubbers has documented in a recent book. But at another level, as the game goes even further, a third actor tends to enter the picture: the State. Anxious to preserve their democratic legitimacy even while they give it all away to the transnationals, European governments had to find some kind of communicational strategy with respect to broad social movements. What they mostly do, via the declarations of the leaders, the police and the information services, is to pass off the demonstrations as a mix of fun-loving kids and more responsible "concerned citizens," whose messages are extremely important in front of the cameras - and totally forgotten at the

negotiating tables. They also have the dogs and the clubs at the ready if there's any chance for a fight, because that can always be addressed most effectively through the communications strategy of "wanton violence in the street," which is great for separating the black blocs from the good people. The effectiveness of this double strategy has become more apparent to many of those among the social movements, but it's very hard to respond coherently from below, because that would require a kind of coordination that freely associating movements just can't produce. Recently at Cancun, one man found a way to respond as an individual: by taking his own life in protest. That's a supreme communications strategy. But the word "interesting" doesn't quite do it justice.

OV: The dominant, commercial discourse is co-opting communication approaches developed by the activists. It does so to neutralize their effect, to destroy the critique, but also because it wants to use activist communications approaches, which are very effective. Do you think it is possible to avoid that dynamic or are we talking about a never-ending process of cooptation on one side and innovation on the other?

BH: The best example of cooptation is probably something like "guerrilla marketing." Agencies found out that they could use light, intimate, casual material - like stickers - that would be fun to distribute, and in that way the target groups themselves could ensure the distribution. So it looks homemade, spontaneous, because it partly is. The idea is to operate on the level of rumor, of conversation, which is where public opinion actually forms. But the more this is done, the more demanding people become with respect to meaning. Anyone engaged in an autonomous, self-motivated activity knows exactly what the issues are, they can't be fooled. And they gradually extend their knowledge through society, by slow but certain means. So the struggle comes to focus over that half-conscious crowd in the middle, all those who in theory could be led by the right communications strategy either to a process or to a product, that is, either to an active role in a meaningful politics or to the simple purchase of a commodity. For the ad industry, and more broadly, for the established powers, for all those who want us to continually "buy into" the contemporary form of society, I think the real struggle is to keep a majority believing that these attempts at cooptation really work - on the others, that is. Because in private, huge amounts of people see through it. So you have literally millions of people wondering why cooptation is so effective on the others. I'd like to say that from there, it's only a short step before they dare to say that the Emperor is naked. But the problem would be to find people who could actually put on the political clothes

without immediately making the same kind of travesty. Or, as some would say, the problem is going beyond representation and the statistical logic of mass communication.

OV: A lot of focus has been put in the last years on tactical communication. The term comes from Michel De Certeau's book "The Practice of Everyday Life," where De Certeau stated that popular culture is not a domain of texts or artifacts but rather a vernacular language of "ways of doing." Representations should be used, in a tactical manner. This means a fast and flexible communication with mostly DIY media, the ability to react immediately. But this is not all there is. The path the message travels seems to be of great importance too?

BH: The tactical theme is one of those great ideas or insights that have transmigrated from the 1970s to the vastly different conditions of today. I think the keywords are "spectacle" and "free association." What De Certeau was trying to point at, in a language between anthropology and poetics, were the millions of people outside all the functions and manipulations of so-called "modern" society - people beneath the technological radar, whose intimate thoughts followed patterns all their own, rich and sophisticated patterns that could be developed freely in a space that was palpable and present, warm and emotional, but essentially outside the consciousness industry. Everyday life, and the everyday imagination of the poor and the powerless, could then be seen as a "tactic" of resistance, escaping the strategies of the standardizing media. Most anthropologists would probably have preferred that it stop right there, with the poor and the powerless and their curious, almost invisible freedoms. But De Certeau's readers in the aftermath of the 70s were mainly young people in or on the fringes of the universities, and they saw that beckoning finger of the tactical pointing at their own lives, their own ways of speaking, doing and imagining, which they dreamed as lying outside what had been recognized as the spectacle society. So small-scale, do-it-yourself media - or what Guattari called "post-media" - appeared as the necessary and missing link to extend the conversations, to touch other people freely and playfully, to form new associations. In this process of improvising new media, a kind of rough-edged, half-finished, everyday artistry became the hallmark of life outside the standards. Just read one of the most beautiful critical texts ever written, under the title of "Post-Media Operators - An Imaginary Address," by a guy named Howard Slater (<http://www.infopool.org.uk/Stamm.htm>). It's a matter of communicative intimacy, of leaving behind a public sphere that's been poisoned by publicity. Free association now takes on the almost psychoanalytic meaning of a ruse or a tactic for avoiding the norm, for escaping the censorship. Information, even when it's journalistic, must

be left open so the others can get in, and the best way to do that is to open your own imagination and practice to the unknown, to the imperfect and unschooled, to the interlinking paths of singular exchanges. Everything is in these paths, whereby through their own conversations people regain that power to form a political opinion which I talked about before. The amazing thing is how quickly it all went. The early nineties in Europe saw an extension of video art approaches to much larger numbers of people, who were interested in politics too, and not so concerned about the artistic niceties and distances that institutions impose. That was the crowd at the first Next 5 Minutes festival in Amsterdam, in 1993. Then straightaway came the Internet, and the video camera could be linked up to a one-to-one/one-to-many planetary distribution system. At this point, a kind of free association in the psychic sense was cast adrift on the net, and it made possible a whole lot of free associations in the anarchist sense, on the urban terrain - which itself became a local stage in the spectacular and networked conflicts of globalization. Free association in the movement of movements is a tactics of transversality, a way to enlarge the struggles without having to look for the statistical averages. And we're still in that same phase, in my view. The thing is to somehow take or follow this ongoing struggle between the spectacular and tactical to a higher level, to the level of pragmatically effective politics under antagonistic conditions. The French group Bureau d'Etudes, with whom I work, is trying to contribute to just that, by the tactical production and distribution of geostrategic maps. Maybe we need to up the ante of tactical engagement.

OV: At the Next 5 Minutes tactical media festival, in September in Amsterdam, one of the very interesting things was the strategic debate about the current situation and future of the global independent media network - Indymedia. To me, it was very interesting to see the fear of the Indymedia people that they have become a brand in the corporate sense. In the perspective of an independent media network, such as Indymedia, how important is the process of "branding"? By that I mean the tactical communication of the organization's symbolic capital in a direction of self-deconstruction, and with that, the creation of the necessary critical distance of one's own audience towards one's own medium. All this with the purpose of stimulating the audience's critical perspective.

BH: You said it! But everything you just described has just about nothing to do with the established practices of branding, which constructs identities, statistical targets, knee-jerk populations. The woman at the N5M tactical festival had who proposed branding Indymedia

had worked for big NGOs like Greenpeace, and that was her argument, bigger is better. Impose a clear identity to get the job done. But the big NGOs have become a kind of counter-example. What is now clear to many is that under neoliberal governance, volunteer organizations are called into disaster areas to do the social work that the corporations don't want to pay for. Though some people within the humanitarian NGOs themselves are quite critical of this, their organizational form and the scales at which they operate make national and international agencies their only real partner. And so they are caught within the form of transnational governance that capital has done so much to create. I mean no harm to the people who tend the world's wounds, but I do believe that if we ever want to get out of this damaging model of predatory globalization, if we ever want to bring back a notion and a realization of substantial equality - the right to food, health care, education, livelihood, and simply to peace - then we have to change the fundamental conditions of statistically averaged communication, which has proven its ability to successfully reproduce exactly the current form of society. A society that includes people only as passive consumers - of charity or whatever - while it simultaneously excludes other people as no more than trash. How do you resist the very logic of that society? Indymedia is an experiment with the network structure, seeking to institute the possibility and reality of directly political relations between individuals and small groups, at what was formerly considered a "massive" scale. This in itself will hardly solve all the problems; but it may provide many people with a way back into social and political involvement and a public dimension of existence, from which all but the managerial classes are now deliberately alienated. That's why I'd say that one of the stupidest proposals I've heard in my entire life is that of branding Indymedia.

OV: Internet is an environment where different economies coexist. The Gift Economy - an economy with no property, where gifts are constantly changing owners - and the Market Economy. In the case of computers, IBM advertises computers with preinstalled Linux open source software. In the case of software, Internet browser Netscape gives its software code to the hacker community for free, where it is collectively developed and improved. Participating in the gift economy seems to be necessary for the product's survival in the market economy... How do you think this coexistence will develop in the future?

BH: This is one of the central themes of the French journal *Multitudes*, with which I am involved. What has been observed, since the general exodus from the factories and the "cultural turn" of the developed economies in the late 70s/early 80s, is an increasing

autonomy of labor, which now takes place primarily within the relational mesh of the urban territory. This new kind of work depends for its motivation on all kinds of imponderables, like the gift economies first described by Marcel Mauss. What's produced are signs, emotions, images, ideas, inventions. And the boss cannot command creativity. It's an "externality," something that can't be included in the accounts. So what emerges are the techniques of capture, a way of vampirizing the creative process to extract a discrete, salable product. Popular music has always been the obvious example, because it always appears locally, then gets totally distorted when it's picked up by the corporations and broadcast around the world. But look at the difficulties those record corporations are having with peer-to-peer file sharing right now! In the domain of collaborative software that you mention, the legal device of copyleft - that is, the Free Software Foundation's General Public License - has been forged to prevent the privatization of collective goods that come out of free association. Another group, creativecommons.org, has attempted to extend the GPL concept to works such as texts, music, movies. But it's important to go much further. Educated or self-educated people, reinterpreting and reinventing their histories, their personal styles and emotions within the urban territory, are treated as "externalities" by the predatory corporations, who give nothing back but advertising and pressure for more police. I think that the infrastructure of cultural creativity - from schools to production facilities - should be developed on a collective basis, so that more and more people can find access to the toolkits and the ideas that will allow them to challenge the worldview of the mass media. But what this means is not a collectivization of the individual, as in the former communist regimes. What we should look for today, to borrow the phrase from Neue Slowenische Kunst, is an "individualization of the collective."

OV: In the perspective of memetics and media ecology - do you think, that coexistence of two economies is possible in the mental environment as well? For example, is it possible to advertise and sell a product or a service and at the same time to cultivate, to nourish the mental environment through a kind of a communication surplus - a gift? Of course we are talking about socially responsible commercial companies. For corporations such as Nike, socially responsible communication is not possible.

BH: What you are talking about is exactly what the anthropologist Karl Polanyi describes, when he says that economic activities are "embedded" in a wider matrix of social relations, including all those complex exchanges we call gifts. In this way there is a social regulation of the market, it's not the only game in town, it fits into other aspects and values of human

existence. The problem is that under the intensely competitive conditions of today it seems no business can really afford to do anything but watch out for the bottom line of profit. In fact, Polanyi says that the conversion into commodities of basic aspects of social existence - land, labor and money itself, but today we can also add knowledge - tends to destroy the social matrix. As Margaret Thatcher used to say, "There is no such thing as society." All social relations must follow the rules of commodity production, which are rules for things, not for people or for ecologies. And these rules can kill the people, they can kill the human ecology, not to mention the media one! To rediscover the gift economies, people have to look outside the norms of neoliberal society, to what Hakim Bey called the TAZ, the Temporary Autonomous Zones. The big political demonstrations take place in exactly those spaces, or rather, they create them. What you experience is a give-away, a ceremonial display of extravagant symbolic wealth which for the most part is destroyed in the very act of display - a kind of potlatch, just like the Situationists said, linking back to Bataille and Mauss. With the events of the last few years we can realize that the notion of potlatch in the Western societies was not an exaggerated theoretical claim, but a simple observation of social communication processes breaking out of a strictly capitalist society, of an imposed subjectivity.

OV: As an American you moved to Paris. You choose Paris for the city to live in. What do you get from Europe, France and Paris that you don't get in the USA?

BH: I guess the fact that there's some recognition, particularly in France, of the things that we've just talked about. I remember flying in a plane once with an American businessman, talking about wine (obligatory subject) and mentioning some anecdote about how my favorite wine shop was closed for three weeks' vacation in the summertime. The guy was shocked: "What would you have a business for, if it's closed for three weeks?" The answer is another question: "What would you have a life for, if it's only a business?" In France at its best, you can have serious public discussions, in the newspapers and even among the political parties, about how a culture can steer itself through the constraints of capitalism without losing what Marcel Mauss called the "delicate essence" of human society. But you can only have those discussions with a real intensity during the moments of social unrest. I really started to feel good in Paris during the general strike of 1995, which brought everything out on the table. What's culture all about, when you don't have enough to eat? That's one of the real questions. Well, it turns out that people have lots of answers, which usually involve changing the rules of coexistence. And that's the most interesting debate, the very basis of a democratic culture.

But as the pseudosocialists came back to full power in the wake of that strike, and as they began pulling the wool back over our eyes and compromising with the bosses' union in the name of Europe, I started to feel closer and closer to my native shores... where Bush was about to be elected, or rather, "selected for the job."

OV: If you would compare the American and European mental environment, what are the main characteristics of each and what are the main differences?

BH: Ask a general question and you get a general answer. The "American mental environment" of 24/24 existence and continuous media saturation is now all about total integration to a distributed war machine. It's what I have called the flexible personality, galvanized by the nationalism of deliberately heightened fear. And it's an Imperial subjectivity, far beyond what had ever been imagined by the Brits in their heyday (even though the endless civil war with the Irish has given Londoners lots of preparation for the current obsession with checkpoints). The post-9/11 American mind wants to make the Internet into an advanced warning radar system for the new kind of planetary civil war. As for the Europeans, of course the many neoliberals on the Continent would like to see a repeat of the USA: a deeply divided class society with an efficient filtering system to keep people functionally apart and a strong ideology to keep their fears turned outward. But the EU neoliberals have a difficult time, because in fact Europeans seem to be obsessed with racism and national identity, and such a total denial of the world they are actually living in keeps their heads in the sand, far from American levels of efficiency. In twenty years when people my age retire, most of the work on the Continent will be done by people who came from elsewhere. Instead of creating a democratic relation of co-development with the surrounding regions, Europeans are letting themselves be pushed into communitarian politics based on security - the so-called security of policed neighborhoods and fixed ideas. But you know, the communicational intimacy I was talking about before has to be objective, open to everyone, or it's worth nothing. What keeps emerging in Europe, and in France like everywhere else, is this narrow communitarian nationalism, the reduced, provincial, garden-fenced version of America's geostrategic paranoia.

OV: Naomi Klein has shown in her article with the title "The Spectacular Failure of Brand America" how incompatible commercial communication is with cultural diversity, democracy, community sense and self-determination. In opposition to commercial strategic



communication, tactical, or let's say social communication, among other things builds communities and promotes participation in the communication processes and with that also democracy. To what extent, do you think, social communication approaches will be used for the purpose of building a strong European Union? A European Union as a cultural and political entity.

BH: That's up to the Europeans! And I really mean it, because the governments won't succeed. We know that the best they can give us are variations on Tony Blair: the Rise and Fall of Spin. A mediated, consensus-building process that smothers you in almost believable lies corresponding to statistically crafted goals which will never be achieved in anything but verbiage. This is the Pink-and-Green Europe. In the face of that, what I also call the new liberalfascist trend of Berlusconi, Aznar, Raffarin, Haider, Schwarzenegger, etc. could just be known as the Black-and-Blue Europe - because if you don't stay home watching the idiotic TV shows, they send out the goons out to beat you with a stick. Unfortunately, at this point we can't depend on the governments to dish us out anything but Europe as a free-trade bloc, which will ultimately make everyone into enemies. The social communication you're talking about can only be invented and put into operation by autonomous social movements. The question of how such movements institutionalize in their turn - as you can see happening around the Metelkova squat in Ljubljana right now - is maybe the decisive one.

OV: Let's get back to communication. The paradox of advertisers is that on one side they praise creativity and ideas - and sometimes designers who work in the commercial sector even talk about art - but on the other hand they are producing ideas, memes, which are standardizing our mental environment into a commercial one. This monocultural environment is also destroying the conditions for creativity, which lay in the mental environment where designers are actually getting their ideas from. To what extent does the commercial, professional environment include any consciousness about the possibilities to use design as a socially responsible communications tool, even as a tool for social change?

BH: That's an excellent question to ask professional designers. Me, I work for free, with ideas that can travel over fiber optics for practically nothing. It's in many ways a self-limiting position, but with the great advantage of not having any pressure from prestige groups or employers. I prefer to have a side job and give the best away. For all the reasons I've explained, I'm not particularly confident the ability of the commercial, professional

environment to produce anything but the reproduction of its own imperatives, at least not until the designers themselves step outside it, or start actively resisting its manipulative structures. The language of social responsibility is currently a dream. To make it real you would first have to wake up from it.

OV: In his book "The Conquest of Cool," Thomas Frank described the marketing concept, invented in the sixties, which makes it possible to target the post-modern consumer individual and the masses at the same time. Cool is somehow a kind of rebellion, breaking the social rules and norms, with the wish of being different than the rest, a wish implanted in all of us. We live that coolness mainly by consuming in a rebellious way, by buying products with a rebellious image made with advertising. In this concept even toothpaste can be cool, if it has a rebellious image attached. Is the next step for people to un-cool themselves to become really cool? : )

BH: Let's just say there's an intense pleasure in turning your back on all that - and the taste is a little sweeter without the label.