Aesthetics vs. Algorithmics in Digital Media
Topics in Media Informatics

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De digitale Stad Amsterdam
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De digitale Stad (abbreviated as DDS) is Dutch for "The digital city". It seems that Amsterdam was the first of its kind: founded in 1993, actually launched as only a ten-week experiment in electronic democracy in January 1994 (Lovink 2002: 47), and closed as a freenet Internet provider in 2001 (62). A Digital City is a community Internet project, i.e. some community services provided to the public of a city via Internet.

Such an interpretation of the name, Digital City, presumes that we take the term, *City*, as standing for the (usually) complex organization that the inhabitants of a city create and maintain in order to sustain and develop the outrageously complex structures they need for their existence in that city. In a digital city, some of those structural components are modelled in digital form. Or, a digital city is the digital (algorithmic, software) companion of the city, the virtual form of some aspects of city life. And different again, we could think of a digital city as nothing but a metaphor used to make known a software system offering for free community services.

The Internet is a technical infrastructure of electronic communication channels connecting computers. It was founded by the US Advanced Research Projects Agency as the ARPA-Net. First ideas started in 1962; in 1969, the BBN company realized a network of computers for research projects communication in the USA; by the end of 1969, four US universities are connected (Stanford Research Institute, UC Los Angeles, UC Santa Barbara, U of Utah); after the NSF (National Science Foundation) entered the development, the ARPANet was closed down on 28 Feb. 1990; before, it had become a subnet of the Internet. Nowadays, that infrastructure has expanded dramatically and is a world-wide technical system. It is the carrier of any number of services. Each such service tries to satisfy a certain need of its clients by offering certain functions.

Often, the special Internet service called World-Wide Web (www) is mistaken for the "Internet". The browser Mosaic (with a graphical user interface), released in 1993, was an important step in popularizing the www and, thereby, the Internet.

A digital city is then a service of the kind that a city government should or may want to offer to the city's inhabitants. The case of Amsterdam's DDS is particularly interesting insofar as The Netherlands, and Amsterdam in particular, are a liberal and open modern society that has on many occasions demonstrated to the world what tolerance, resistance, civel rights, and caring for the young generation could mean. It may, therefore, not come as a surprise that the idea of providing free access to the Internet came up in Amsterdam and was actually first realized there. Its liberal and, in some sense, liberating story ended on the 1 August, 2001, when the DDS facilities were turned into an ordinary commercial Internet provider.

Within a capitalist society, we must again learn this lesson. A grass-root initiative by independent citizens may get off the ground and prosper for some while. But it will, sooner or later, and by necessity, be closed down, perhaps even destroyed, or transformed into an officially sanctioned organization owned by private capital or an agency.of the bourgeois state.

You do find quite a bit about the Amsterdam DDS on the Internet, often in Dutch. There are also a number of print publications. One easily accessible in English is

> Geert Lovink: The digital city – metaphor and community. In G. Lovink: *Dark fiber. Tracking critical Internet culture.* Cambridge, MA: MIT Press 2002, p. 42-67

Amsterdam (as many other places in Europe and worldwide) had in the 1980s seen an autonomous, in part violent, and quite successful squatters movement (*krakers*). Activists occupied deserted, unoccupied buildings and used them as their living quarters. This movement had petered out in the 1990s, but it had created a higher awareness among citizens of a civil society and the option of running a community at least in part, or for certain issues, from below and without governmental interference. Lovink says: "... its autonomous yet pragmatic mode of operation had infiltrated the workings of the more progressive cultural institutions." (43) The culural centers *Paradiso* and *De Balie* in the city center, vanguards of local cultural politics, started to embrace technological culture (which they still do: the bi-annual *Sonic Acts* Festival!). The Do It Yourself (DIY) movement and the gradual availability of low-tech electronic components transformed the Amsterdam groups from the typically critical attitude against technology into a lively and active port for alernative ways of looking at and contributing to digital technology. The hackers movement drew public attention by spectacular actions and events. In Amsterdam, they were willing "to structure themselves as an open social movement." (44)

Two events in particular sparked great attention: a performance by the German *Chaos Computer Club* in 1988, and the *Galectic Hackers Party* one year later, both at *Paradiso*, "the first open, public international convention of hackers in Europe". (44) A media culture existed in Amsterdam, as Lovink says, "which was neither shaped by market-oriented populism nor informed by highbrow cultural elitism." (45) The relevant scene had no ties with parliamentarism or the political establishment (which, of course, existed in Amsterdam as anywhere else in Western Europe). Apparently, "there was no intervntion from above and, more particularly, no censorship or even surveillance." (45)

When DDS was started in 1994, it became an immediate big success with normal citizens joining (and not only the alternative scene). „Awareness of privacy issues, corporate media control, and censorship was high, and the need to use cryptography was felt early, as was the right to anonymity while communicating via the Internet. The Digital City did not turn into a propaganda mouthpiece for the City Hall, under the guise of 'bringing politics closer to the common people thanks to information technology.'" (50)

DDS's success story seems to be at a turning point in 1998 when it had grown to a "business of 25 employees and 70,000 regular users" (51). The factual leader then, Joost Flint, started to change the anarchic way DDS had been run so far. The growing numbers and the handling of real money may have made this necessary. DDS had been a facilitator for communities, not a community itself. This appeared in a simple central interface of the website that served more or less to announce what the site was for, with links to the more important sub-sites and hundreds of individual homepages.

The original design had served as an "empty shell that would be filled up by users and customers, without very much intervention from the DDS staff. But that formula turned out to result in a static system. ... It remained unclear whether the net really was such a good place to conduct a meaningful, in depth discussion." (53)

"Five years after its founding the Digital City had evolved from an amateur, low-tech, non-budget grassroots initiative into a fully professionalized technology and business driven organization." (55) Around 1998/99 commercial providers of Internet services popped up everywhere offering the same or better and more effective services. Relying on advertisements or other income, such providers at times even operated free of charge.

The use base of DDS started to erode quantitatively and in quality. The number of accounts still increased up to its high of 160,000 in the year 2000. But their ideology was no longer mainly community-building or, al least, politically relevant information exchange. The pioneering vision had lost its attractiveness. The Internet was not a vanguard, far-out, and politically somehow different opportunity. It had become more mainstream than autonomous.

When attempts failed to gain regular subsidies from Amsterdam or EU official channels, to maintain a non-profit independent status, DDS was forced into the market. (57). Internet service providers offer products for which they collect money. A freenet, on the other hand, wants to create a community of people. When DDS saw no other way any more to fund their activities, DDS had to surrender to the forces of the capitalist market and transformed itself into an ordinary Internet service provider.

The initial DDS was born out of local considerations of community politics, fostered by the DIY technological movement. The concentration on *local* issues of a free and liberal community was at the heart of the DDS success. Even in the metophor of the City, this concentration on the *local* shows up. It inherently refers to places, like street, plaza, meeting place, buildings. The metaphorics of the Internet is different. It is global. (world-wide, network). In comparison to the "presumably friction-free machinic globality ... social networks, in order to be successful,need to be rooted in local structures." (63)

Use of a metaphoric language can, of course, not explain anything happening in the real world. There must always be more basic processes. But our ideology may be influenced by the way weargue about what we are doing. The ideology may, in turn, prevent us from taking the right decisions at the right time and thus losing the strong connectios any activity on a local level requires.

"... DDS was, more than anything, a social experiment in Internet freedom with only a few hints of what political liberty in the technological future could look like.." (64) How to stay independent in a profit-based environment, and true to basic, local needs and goals – that is the problem for any economic and legal movement in a democratic society. The excitement of algorithmic processes and digital technology can take us far from our individual basis into local politics. But it cannot break the chains of the economic environment. The algorithmic principle on the level of everyday life and society may, in an almost playful manner, lead us to marvellous experience and success. But it is embedded into and restraint by principles of a higher political level.