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ByPalle Torsson

The Pirate Bay, a tracker website based in Sweden, has become the most popular BitTorrent site in the world and now receives more daily hits than CNN. The Pirat Byran (Pirate Association) is its sister organisation, and promotes information piracy and its culture through discussions, media advocacy and legal advice. *Mute* talked to Palle Torsson of Pirat Byran about filesharing culture in Sweden and the 'grey commons'

piratebyran

Image > Pirates and filesharers demonstrating in Stockholm on Sunday May 1st, 2005, Piratbyran

Mute: The Pirate Bay is one of the most popular BitTorrent trackers, could you tell us about how The Pirate Bay and Pirat Byran came about?

PT: Pirat Byran was born in 2003 from an integrated internet radio broadcast community and IRC channel populated by the Swedish hacker community and Demo scene. PB was initiated to support the free copying of culture and launched the BitTorrent tracker and website: The Pirate Bay. When TPB expanded to become the biggest BitTorrent tracker in the world it was natural for them to split up into two different entities. PB has evolved into a community and an information site in Swedish with news, forums, articles, resources and a shop and has to date over 50,000 members. PB organises events, appears in debates, writes and answers questions about IP and filesharing. TPB had recently gone through a major internationalisation and can now be browsed in many languages, from Mandarin to Icelandic.

Mute: I read some time ago a report on Interactivist <http://linkme2.net/5o> about filesharing protests in Sweden. I understand you spoke at the demo?

PT: Yes, but the speech I made took most of my energy. It was the second year when internet lovers, filesharers and pirates gathered in Stockholm to express their fight for internet freedom. There was music and three speakers talking about the transgression of IP law and creativity. A hand to hand copyswap was extended to a coffin where you could place and share CDs. A big crowd of something like 800 people assembled with banners declaring things like: 'No Software Patents', 'Sharing is Caring' and 'All Your Base [Stations] Belong to Us.' This aggressively humorous attitude is something that characterises the movement in Sweden. One beautiful example is the letter written by TPB in response to legal threats and the request by big companies like Microsoft, DreamWorks and Warner Bros, to remove copyrighted material: <http://thepiratebay.org/legal.php>.

Last year the transgression of IP law spurred a copy riot in Sweden; people from right to left have woken up and spoken out on the subject. This escalated further when Sweden's anti-piracy lobby organisation, Antipiratbyran (APB), raided Swedish ISPs claiming they hosted unlicensed material. The raid was conducted in an unlawful manner and it was discovered APB had paid an infiltrator for several months to upload copyright-protected material and place hardware at the ISP.

This spawned a public outcry and the lawyer and spokesperson for APB, Henrik Ponten, received hate-SMS, including death threats, from a lot of angry kids. The homepage of APB was hacked by a group that called themselves Angry Young Hackers and mails between people from APB were published showing that APB were also infiltrated. In response PB has pressed charges against APB for their different unlawful actions. And APB was told by Swedish authorities to withdraw the most aggressive of these threats to protect their own integrity.

The demonstration was mostly a great celebration with a lot of different people sharing and also making connections. The slogans at the demonstration were: 'Copy me – we will continue to copy everything', 'Don't touch our internet' and 'Welfare begins at 100 Mbit'. The counter-allegations against the anti-pirate organisation APB for the action and the raid at the Swedish ISP Bahnhof was ready at that time and was handed to the police.

Mute: As I understand it Sweden has yet to sign European agreements on copyright law. Does this make it a 'zone of exception' as far as the increasingly aggressive policing of IP is concerned?

PT: No, but for a long time it was legal to download for personal use. Now the EU [Copyright] Directive is implemented and in force in Sweden (as of 1 July), even though there have not yet been any cases resulting from the new law. This 'zone of exception' comes rather from the fact that people accept and live with filesharing, the police don't have the will, priorities or resources to criminalise kids. TPB and PB is a concrete, factual and living example of this, among other things. This zone of exception is important and natural for this generation and is not something that will change any time soon.

Mute: What is the bigger picture behind these protests? Was this the first public act of disobedience in opposition to the new laws or are there events that have prefigured this one?

PT: PB has a broad political base, from high-tech autonomists to free libertarians. A group based in Malmo called The Street Action looks upon filesharing as digital class struggle and organises public copyswaps inside shopping malls in order to desecrate the commodity. And there are several other interesting projects based on disobedience in Sweden, of which my favourites are Planka.nu and Snatta.nu. Planka.nu is a site for free subway riding and runs a fund to which you can subscribe and get your money back in case you get caught and fined. Snatta.nu is a site for shoplifting culture.

Mute: You spoke of finding the 'power to strike again', at what forms of power are you directing these attacks and through what means?

PT: I always appropriate, borrow or steal others people's work to make something new. I live in, distribute, and take from the circulation of information. The configurations of the medial structures in which this information exists is the pipeline in which I work. The motivation for my work is to try to intervene in this structure and to create an alternative work space, basically to make my becoming a place where I am free to appropriate again.

There is an endless amount of targets to strike that oppose our way of living, but right now it feels important to build the alternative playground of sharing and gift culture. The confrontation comes naturally in the process of exploring these grounds. The primary means for this is collaboration and exchange of knowledge. I think hacking that involves hardware modification will become more important because the industry understands they have lost the information battle and are moving towards the protection of hardware. This means that it will be important to realise real infrastructures of communication like Wi-Fi and meshed networks and self-made entities for IP broadcast.

piratebyran

Image > Pirates and filesharers demonstrating in Stockholm on Sunday May 1st, 2005, Piratbyran

Mute: What then are the implications of a 'post-scarcity' system in which the cultural products of immaterial labour are available for free exchange, whilst the cost of living and reproducing oneself rises?

PT: The flow of money and information are immanent to each other. When information is transformed into commodities they become potential allocators of the money you could buy food with. If you are a student you'd rather spend your money on beer and as a parent you spend your money on food rather than paying for CDs or books. If you use alternative circulations like the library, sharing or downloads, your economy becomes richer.

The hacker, the artist or the housewife for that matter, do not live independent from the economic structure of society – on the contrary they are parasites upon existing structures in place within welfare systems, companies and universities. Like all people they are attached to a grey zone where they produce an important surplus value for society that we find more important than most are willing to openly admit. [For a critical discussion of this notion, see Steve Wright's 'Reality Check: are we living in an immaterial world?' in this issue of Mute, p.34-45]

Mute: Trackers (and other P2P technologies) are playing a powerful role in the 'economy of attention'. They are becoming important producers of opinion, hype, and desire around new releases from multinationals, as well as facilitating their distribution. Are there ways that Pirate Bay can radicalise this process?

PT: Yes, by bringing in new groups to filesharing. For instance, as in the project 'small pirates' run by PB where the focus is on filesharing for parents and kids, or bringing new content to the trackers as in the project Vidensdeling.nu run by the Danish Pirat Gruppen. I think there is a radical process inherent in the movement, so what is needed is to deepen the understanding of the redistribution of culture. One recent attempt was the book produced by PB about filesharing culture, Copy Me. A lot of projects have evolved from the forums at PB. I think it is important to always branch out into different projects so that the process becomes independent from singularities of any kind.

There are always different levels of involvement in a community, some rising and some falling. I think filesharing and open source has a radicalising process attached to it right now because it points to the structural division of information in society. I would say that these links you talk about already exist, the important thing is to make them visible. The best way to do so is to get important files and projects online for filesharing. One of the more recent examples initiated by the sister organisation of the PB in Denmark, Pirat Gruppen, is a project called Vidensdeling.nu. Students are encouraged to digitise and share the expensive books on their reading lists, and in this way use filesharing to create a digital library resource for fellow students, circumventing the costs and control of large publishers. So far, the campaign has resulted in books being shared on The Pirate Bay, while the publishing companies have joined the entertainment industry in their desperate hunt for filesharers. The Pirate Bay can be used by anyone that wants to share files or come up with new models for distribution.

Mute: The asymmetry of access to ownership of communications media is a major factor provoking their seizure and re-distribution. Historically, piracy has arisen at times of enormous economic hegemony (empire), and though formed in opposition to dominant culture frequently plays an economic and geopolitical role in reproducing it. How can the new forms of data piracy support and nourish alternatives and even opposition to dominant economic imperatives?

PT: Overcoming lack of access is not a very important notion in our approach. Not even opposition to dominant forms of culture. Internet piracy is all about desiring-production, and its deepest effects in the long run may well not have so much to do with access, or may go far beyond that notion – just as Walter Benjamin talked about art as the production of desires that cannot yet be satisfied, but will inevitably reach far beyond goals originally impossible to imagine.

Maybe what is most important now is to bypass the urge for solutions, for victory in battles or for compromise and stability. For example, talking about how to 'compensate' copyright holders obscures the truth about the social production of culture, replacing it with the myth of copyright as some kind of 'wage' for artists. On the contrary, trying to keep the 'grey zone' as open and wide as possible, will almost automatically produce better conditions for going beyond prevalent economic imperatives. If nothing else, it will do this by simply curing some of the neurotic sickness of copying-control. But making general statements about different political implications and alternative economic models when talking about piracy and free copying would almost be like accepting copyright's claim to universality.

I think the shift to alternative ways of organising, in more of a rhizomatic manner, is driven by desires and the possibilities of connection. The drive to think, invent and discover alternative processes of production is the affirmative power of life as an experiment in complexity.

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<http://www.piratbyran.org>

<http://www.artliberated.org>

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