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# Autolabs: Critiquing Utopia

By David Garcia

If government and corporate media are increasingly 'tactical' and 'devolved', do tactical media projects mirror strategic capitalist objectives or create real opportunities for oppositional expression? Brazil's 'third way' government has made high speed internet access on open source platforms available to its people through Telecentros across the country. David Garcia reports on a non-governmental project which tried to help the urban poor use these new resources to their own ends

In Itaquera, one of the many poor districts on the eastern edge of Sao Paulo, something strange has been happening. Among the market stalls and street traders a surprising number of high priced shops can be found selling furniture and consumer electronics. In one of these shops a minor disturbance has broken out among the slick salesmen whose job it is to entice the local populace into a lifetime of debt. On their expensive widescreen TVs instead of football or the media giant Globo's endless diet of glossy soaps, through bursts of static the inflammatory graphic artist Latuff suddenly appears. A group of wide eyed youngsters watch as he demonstrates how stamps can be used to print provocative political slogans onto bank notes. Latuff is quickly followed by a group of teenage girls (some as young as 14) teaching other kids how to avoid pregnancy and AIDS with a hilarious demonstration of condom use. Obviously illegal, this intervention creates a momentary tear in the fabric of Brazil's hegemonic broadcast media reality, briefly signaling the existence of another world of expressive possibilities. But the fabric is swiftly re-stitched, the TVs almost immediately re-tuned, and their normal function as the narcotic dream machines of the Favelas resumes.

These interruptions to normal service originate from a series of live pirate transmissions whose source is a party just across the street. It's one of a series of events to mark the completion of Autolabs, an experiment in transplanting tactical media labs in free software from the comparatively privileged networks frequented by well educated artists and activists into three poor districts in the east of the city: Ermelino Matarazzo, Itaquera and São Miguel Paulista.

The fact that I was witnessing something more than just another NGO exercise in community education (the soft police) was evident from the fact that some of the instructors were winding up the project with a live practical demonstration of how to make pirate television. Brazil's government has already established the Telecentros, a justly famous network of free public internet access centres running on free software, but Autolabs tries to take things further. As its founders believe, extending and intensifying the free circulation of knowledge is not necessarily liberating in and of itself. They want to do more than merely perpetuate 'communicative capitalism's endless reflexive circuits of discussion.' Autolabs' alternative is to emphasise the critical and above all expressive potential of tactical media. Autolabs set out to create a network of autonomous spaces owned and maintained by people from the 'peripheral communities' in order to make their own media and develop 'visual, sonic and textual sensitivities, making social actions of collective utility possible.'

Since February 2004 Autolabs have been attempting to teach the principles and practices of tactical media where it matters most. Initiated by artist Giseli Vasconcelos 18 months after the success of the first Brazilian Tactical Media Lab (Mídia Tática), Autolabs was set up in close collaboration with the other members of the Mídia Tática group, Tatiana Wells and Ricardo Rosas. Each lab was constructed out of discarded computers, reconditioned, upgraded and connected into functioning networks. By the end of June 2004 three new media centres had been established based not only on open free software but also on a belief in and practice of autonomy. But this simple presentation of facts hides a complex and difficult journey marked by painful concessions and contradictions.

## AUTONOMY AND REALITY

Many of the problems were caused by the organisers' understandable decision to pay not only Autolabs' instructors but also its participants. Naturally Autolabs was wildly over-subscribed. In the early weeks of the project the instructors were quite overwhelmed by the numbers. Many of the kids who turned up were simply there for the money, occasionally browsing the websites of popular TV programmes. It was only when Autolabs stopped paying participants that Autolabs proper could actually begin. With only the motivated students remaining, there was finally time and space for real communication and teaching to happen. Projects of real value gradually started to emerge: a hip hop outfit set up their own website and mixed their CDs in the lab; a free radio group formed; also the above mentioned group of teenage girls, many of whom had been pregnant, began taking their safe sex message around the schools of the eastern zone. Confirming both Autolabs' success and its problematic proximity to mainstream media, the Autolabs are now being taken over as part of the government's Telecentros programme, with the most motivated of the kids themselves being employed as teachers. This is some way from the original lofty goal of creating truly autonomous centres, however, and the connection with Telecentros is seen by many as too much of a compromise.

## EXCEPTIONAL BRAZIL?

Autolabs ambiguous success cannot be understood without looking a bit more closely at Brazil's unique and contradictory media and software politics. From some perspectives there could not be a more hospitable soil for tactical media than Brazil. The national government has the world's most active policy on free software and the creative commons. There are enough facts to support the conclusion that this is not simply a matter of lip service. To begin with there is a bill currently before the Brazilian parliament seeking to introduce a default Creative Commons licence for all cultural immaterial labour carried out in Brazil. A populist symbol of the current administration's commitment is the decision of the charismatic minister of culture and popular musician, Gilberto Gil, to release his next CD under a Creative Commons licence, much to the consternation of his record company.

The drive to integrate free software and media at all levels of society can also be seen in the Telecentros project, with hundreds of computer and media centres opened in poor districts providing high speed internet on open source platforms. One of the principal architects of the Telecentros, Sergio Amadeu, is currently being sued by Microsoft after an interview in which he compared the corporation to 'drug dealers' getting poor countries hooked by giving their products away.

The minister of culture's long term friend and associate Claudio Prado is now the driving force behind the ministry's latest ambitious initiative: the Polos Digitais, which involves a high speed roll out hundreds of new media centres with training and guidance taking place in a large 'mothership' in the centre of Sao Paulo. Many local activists remain critical of the Polos Digitais programme, believing that the imminent regional elections will cause an otherwise worthwhile initiative to fail through excessive haste and a lack of understanding about which elements of the scheme will actually work in practice.

Brazil's radical approach to creative commons policy does not mean that the ruling Partido dos Trabalhadores (PT, the Workers Party) is committed to wider social transformation. On this subject the sense of betrayal among activists in Sao Paulo is palpable. Pablo Ortellado of Indymedia Brazil articulated the general disappointment, describing how the PT had once been 'as good [as] a political party can be', succeeding in uniting the radical splinters of the left into a coherent party with a real chance of power. But after narrowly losing the election before last, the PT transformed itself into a third way social democratic organisation. This has left the radical left more disillusioned than most. One symptom of its apathy is that a mega-city on the scale of Sao Paulo could only muster 7,000 marchers in the protests preceding the Iraq war. Rightly or wrongly the blame for much of this is laid at the door of the media giant, Globo. Globo's power to determine the outcomes of elections and

influence key policy decisions is well known and the forest of aerials and satellite dishes across the rooftops of the shanty towns makes it plain. Even the poorest of the poor have television, if not refrigerators.

Bearing the government's third way agenda in mind, the new media training centres of the Polos Digitais programme look less benign. There is a temptation to dismiss or bypass such initiatives as boot camps designed to retrain, discipline and control a potential workforce for a neoliberal, IT orientated industrial era. But for Autolabs, at least, this paralysing critique is far too deterministic. Like all tactical media, Autolabs is based on the fact that new media are not just media, they are tools, making outcomes difficult to determine. Autolabs only makes sense if we assume that the intentions of strategic players do not inevitably prevail. As always the name of the game is appropriation. And the main question is, who appropriates who? Those operating on the frontline of community activism understand that there is more to our world than ideology.

### CRITICAL VOICES

At 'Fimde', an event marking the end of the Autolabs project, some of the questions haunting tactical projects were given an airing. Wasn't the fetishisation of media itself a distraction from the real problems of poverty and class? Wasn't it time to reinstate the economic as the master signifier in such hegemonic struggles? But when I put this point to the free radio warriors and activists of Submídia (one of the groups acting as instructors at Autolabs as well as contributing their expertise in pirate media to help in the project's dissemination), they rejected the proposition without a moment's hesitation. Brazil, they insist, is a mediatised society of a particularly virulent nature in which vast swathes of the population are literally sedated by Globo's stream of soap operas. In the struggle against fundamental economic inequality, the reappropriation of media must come first.

But the questions continued to recur in various forms, both during and after the project's completion and assimilation into the Telecentros programme. Do Autolabs (and similar tactical projects) simply appear critical, at best providing a few jobs for the most cooperative members of the excluded classes? In a recent discussion with the Autolabs organisers I pursued this point in more detail, asking what kind of new 'critical' or oppositional options Autolabs have opened up for their participants. Can a project originating from 'outside' a community become the property of that community? One of the organisers, Tatiana Wells, responded by writing:

During my workshops I was sure it was owned by the community and we have many tapes and insights to prove it. Our participants 'also learnt how to have fun!' ... discovering how the expressive use of the media can put us in control of our desires, that we are then free to communicate, in many different ways.

This is precisely the dimension denied in similar projects, such as the Telecentros. So learning low-tech editing, DIY sites and movies, graphic experimentation, free radio, learning how to recognise and interact with our desires is for me as critical as it gets.

Later in our exchange, Wells revealed a little more about the uncertainties surrounding the future of the existing Autolabs:

There was the moment that the project became distant from the community; it was when the last autolab workshop finished. The first thing they did was to change back the name it will be 'Telecentro Caju SMP'. But for sure it will be a different kind of Telecenter if hosted by those who were part of the Autolabs, there [are] plans that at least one of the labs will host a radio station and cinema sessions. But our own participation is over and at the moment we are very unsure of how we can approach it again or continue [to] influence its workings.

## BEYOND THE COMMONS

If the Brazilian State's use of the language and protocols of the Creative Commons to confront the increasingly restrictive dominion of intellectual property is unequalled, the work of the Mídia Tática group serves to illuminate the impotence of a policy of radical informational politics without a wider agenda for social and economic transformation. The hard lessons of Autolabs have not paralysed Mídia Tática, Digitophagy, their show at the Museum of Image and Sound in São Paulo in October 2004, will directly address many of the questions raised by Autolabs while, through such projects, important new links are being forged both inside and outside of Latin America. Indeed the reason that the Autolabs project was not completely uncoupled from its values by entrenched local power brokers was that the organisers never lost touch with the autonomous forms of knowledge arising from their relationship to global networks of resistance.

## LINKS

AUTOLABS [http://www.midiatatica.org/autolabs/speak\\_english.htm](http://www.midiatatica.org/autolabs/speak_english.htm)

SUBMIDIA <http://submidia.radiolivres.org/>

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