

Free networks and self-organisation
Interview with Armin Medosch
by Ulf Treger

In metropolises such as London, Vienna and Berlin, free networks have developed in recent years. These collectively organised, electronic network structures enable non-commercial and open access to the Internet as well as the creation of independent communication channels. The basic technical principle of any Internet-based communication is lossless copyability and simple distribution of data. While (digitised) content can now be created and distributed more easily than ever before, a great deal of energy is being invested in the technical and social regulation and containment of these fundamental characteristics in the interests of the extensive commercial exploitation of knowledge, often without success.

In turn, attempts are being made to transfer the concept of free software to other levels. In this context, Volker Grassmuck has coined the term 'knowledge commons', referring to the commons, a pre-industrial concept of the communal use of (food) resources. The Free Networks' initiatives to build open and collaborative network infrastructures can be seen as part of this development. According to Armin Medosch, co-founder of the magazine *Telepolis* and author of the book 'Freie Netze' (Free Networks), such a 'network commons' stands for an 'experiment in grassroots democratic self-organisation' and follows a 'basic need' for the exchange of information, the 'facilitation of which as technical communication requires collective action'.

The inexpensive wireless technology WLAN (1), which can now be used without a licence within the otherwise largely regulated radio spectrum (radio, television or mobile phones), is not a prerequisite, but an extremely helpful factor for the development of free networks. With the help of inexpensive transceivers and self-built antennas, individual nodes can easily be set up and expanded into wireless networks.

In the run-up to the Berlin conference 'Wizards of OS 3—The Future of the Digital Commons', where concepts of a digital commons will be discussed on a broad scale between 10 and 12 June 2004, Armin Medosch was asked about the cultural and social aspects of free networks.

Following the collapse of Dotcom Mania, there has been not only widespread economic but also cultural disillusionment. The Internet has been reduced to the role of a useful tool, while it is subject to increasing regulation and at the same time hardly seems to be used as a place for criticism or appropriative practices. What concepts can be applied to this development?

Armin Medosch: I think part of this 'disillusionment' is actually a very useful development, because it means that we are moving away from the techno-determinism of the 'visionary' phase. The internet has not 'automatically' led to all these great social changes that were predicted for a while. The social impact of the technology was overestimated. At the same time, many 'net cultures' are currently flourishing that are trying to derive ideas or principles from free and open source software (2) and short-circuit them with other areas of society. So it's about so-called intellectual property, but also about social principles of self-organisation. I see this as progress, even if there are some weak points in this 'open-everything' discussion.

What weaknesses are you thinking of?

In principle, it's about the economics, but also about the expectations of those involved, which can be very different. On the one hand, a lot of open source software is now developed on behalf of and paid for by companies such as Sun and IBM, but on the other hand, there still seem to be many people who believe that the world would change for the better if only everyone used open source

software. It is also important to remember Richard Stallman's distinction between free software and open source: open source is perfectly compatible with capitalism in highly industrialised countries.

While free software has become a largely positive term, many people tend to think of wireless networks as evil 'hackers' who infiltrate other people's computers. But what connects free software and free networks?

Firstly, on a very pragmatic level. Although there are no rules on how to set up a free network, there is a broad consensus that only free software should be used. In addition, it is about decentralising knowledge, publishing protocols, whether technical or social, as well as work results in the sense of 'best practice' and thus making them freely accessible. Secondly, the concept is clearly based on free software. The term Free Networks was chosen by the scene itself, also to distinguish it from the Wi-Fi boom fuelled by the industry (3). The technology used is not at the centre, but the methodology and the goal. At the same time, there are also differences, one of the most important of which is that software has the marvellous property of being able to be copied and distributed almost effortlessly and infinitely once it exists. A free network, on the other hand, firstly contains physical-material components that cannot be copied so easily, and secondly a continuous commitment of labour. These networks need to be kept in operation and maintained. This cannot be rationalised away, and it is also important to emphasise this aspect of human labour.

When people talk about 'organic growth', 'collaborative strategy' and the 'self-management of social systems' in the context of free networks, are they repeating the myths and utopias from the early days of the internet? And aren't these the visions that also make the cheeks of more progressive business magazines such as 'Wired' or 'brand eins' (4) glow?

I don't feel called upon to defend such a choice of words, along with their possibly inbuilt ideological inclinations, but what is so 'mythical' about collaboration if it is free, i.e. self-chosen, and not primarily driven by a monetary impulse? What chance do we have of fundamentally reforming society if not through processes that can be loosely described as self-organisation, which also means personal responsibility and self-determination?

If we want to look at the negative example of the failure of such ideas, then the 1990s, blinded by the internet hype, are less relevant than the 1960s and the so-called New Social Movements, the communes, the self-managed houses and grassroots democratic ideas. Even if much has gone down the drain, these things still contain many values and motivations that are still worth fighting for, because in principle they are about the great promise of Western liberal democracies: the combination of individual and collective freedom. The fact that such concepts can also be appropriated by the progressive wing of the economy—I would describe the readers of 'brand eins' as capitalists with a guilty conscience—is not something I can do anything about. Nor can I argue with the fact that George W. Bush claims to be defending freedom. My suspicion is that self-management in this context can be translated as the post-Fordist optimisation of economic value creation contexts. However, this leaves the 'rule of capital' (if you want to put it in old-fashioned terms) untouched, as does the dominance of the bureaucratic management class.

A study on the usage habits of the Gnutella file-sharing system (5) shows that the majority of all available files are offered by only one per cent of users, while 70 per cent do not share a single file for download. This gives rise to the suspicion that open, collaborative concepts only work because a few people contribute a great deal to a common basis, while others tend to participate parasitically. Free networks, which are similar to file sharing at this point, are based on the concept of mutual support. You use the term 'network commons' in this context, how practicable are its principles?

I don't see 'network commons' as a given that can be analysed retrospectively, but as a question that allows us to address the very problems you mentioned. How can a free resource be built up and maintained without falling victim to the commons dilemma, i.e. destruction through overuse by selfish individuals? What mechanisms should be in place to increase the chance that the 'tragic self-destruction of the commons' does not occur? Can these mechanisms be imagined as principles that do not have to be imposed from above, in the sense of 'laws' i.e. rules determined by others?

Thinking a few steps further into the future, with the constant progress of miniaturisation and networking of electronic devices, new dimensions of electronic communication will develop that will have an even greater impact on physical spaces than before. How do you see the concept of free networks in the future? What could the possibilities for cultural and emancipative practices based on it look like?

At the moment, there is a lot of hot air around 'locative media', i.e. location-based 'glocal' network applications, and I would like to refrain from commenting for the time being until the wheat has been separated from the chaff. What I find more important is that the practice of free networks is linked to a process that leads away from the mystification of technology and allows the prospect of a grassroots democratic and emancipatory formulation of techno-political 'futures'.

What is still being sold to us today as the future in the sense of an 'information and knowledge society' is in principle the future of the day before yesterday, the cybernetic post-Fordism of the Cold War, which hides its militaristic-elitist core behind the promised blessings of ever better, smaller, cheaper consumer products. Today, however, we have the chance to imagine futures without such control society fantasies and to improvise with practical tools, such as mobile ad-hoc mesh networks (6). We may not be able to determine developments, but consistent work in these areas ensures that the big players have to be on their guard and that the clocks cannot be set back again.

Interview: Ulf Treger

Armin Medosch: *Freie Netze – Geschichte, Politik und Kultur offener WLAN-Netze*. Telepolis/Verlag Heinz Heise, 240 pages, 16 euros.

This interview was published originally in *ak – analyse + kritik*, Nr. 485, 18.06.2004
republished on <https://www.linksnet.de/artikel/18742>

Notes:

- 1) WLAN (Wireless Local Area Network) are wireless computer networks that use radio technology.
- 2) Free and open source software: The term 'open source' stands for source code of a programme that is freely available and may be freely modified. Free software is also freely available and modifiable, but according to Richard Stallmann, in contrast to open source, not in the sense of optimising products and their market form, but rather according to fundamental ideas of freedom of information and community.
- 3) Wi-Fi is a special industry standard for wireless network communication.
- 4) 'Wired' is the leading medium for the dissemination of market-shaped technology culture from California, 'brand eins' is a German business magazine.
- 5) The music exchange Napster was probably the best-known file-sharing system. This is generally understood to mean computer networks that make it possible to exchange files such as music, texts or films over the Internet, i.e. to offer them to each other and download them.

6) In a mesh network, mobile phones, small computers or laptops can establish connections to each other without a superordinate infrastructure. Each device serves not only as a transmitting and receiving station for voice or data, but also as an internet connection.