

Missing link: Free networks – First we conquer the neighborhood, then the world

Freifunk, Confine & Co. spread the feeling of network freedom in the early 2000s. In the Trump era, their message is more relevant and necessary than ever.



(Image: ZinaidaSopina/Shutterstock.com)

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In a world where political divides are deeper than ever before and calls for "alternative facts" and national segregation have resounded, the digital age paradoxically seems to promise both absolute control and unprecedented freedom. Populists like Donald Trump are masterfully using the power of centralized media and social networks to sow division. But at the same time, a quiet but powerful headwind is emerging – not only, but also from the spirit of socially acceptable communication

technology.

Armin Medosch's work The Rise of the Network Commons, now published posthumously by the Institute of Network Cultures in Amsterdam, initially seems to have fallen out of time. It is a "blast from the past", a reminder of early ideas of the Internet as a place in which every participant should have equal rights as a consumer and producer and be able to openly express their opinions in an improved form of agora.

And yet the volume is extremely topical in these stormy moments: it points to a future in which power is not dictated from above, but lived from below, in self-organized digital communities. It is about self-determination and a potential digital renaissance. This is an urgent read, especially now that the foundations of democracy are shaking.

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Alternative to commercial access providers

Medosch may still be known to some readers as the co-founder and co-editor of Telepolis. However, the Austrian, who was born in 1962 and died in 2017 at the age of just 55, was also a media artist, theorist, critic and pioneer of internet culture in Europe. In his book "Freie Netze: Geschichte, Politik und Kultur offener WLAN-Netze", published by Heise in 2004, he documented the emergence and development of self-organized local network initiatives. In it, he describes how these WLAN communities emerged as an alternative to commercial Internet providers.

In this publication, Medosch already formed the idea of the "network commons". At the heart of the network commons is the shared use and management of network infrastructures as a public resource. The author sees this piece of common property as an exemplary model for similar trends in areas such as free software and hardware, which also question traditional ownership structures and are based on openness, collaboration and the sharing of knowledge and infrastructures. He uses relevant communities in London, New York, San Francisco, Seattle, Berlin, Vienna, Portland and Zurich as examples.

Ten years later, Medosch set about writing an English-language sequel, which he initially published in chapters on his blog The Next Layer. The last entry was entitled "The incomplete paradigm shift" and was published in May 2015.

"MISSING LINK"

Belated message in a bottle

Another decade later, two of Medosch's companions, his neighbor and fellow networker Adam Burns from his London days and the Berlin media sociologist Volker Grassmuck, have now published the notes in a bundle. Also included are detailed case studies on wireless networks: one in the form of an open letter from Medosch to Fidel and Raul Castro after his visit to Cuba and a report on two cases from Chile by media researcher Ignacio Nieto Larrain.

"The book in your hands is a message in a bottle that washed ashore ten years after it was sent," the editors tell readers on their journey into another networked world. It mainly deals with wireless community network projects such as Freifunk in Berlin and the Spanish version Guifi.net, which Medosch combined with the results of the EU-funded research project Confine.

The model for this was the Consume.net movement that emerged in London at the end of the 20th century. Medosch emphasizes that the two founders of this network, James Stevens from the creative center Backspace and the designer and entrepreneur Julian Priest, were not "techies". He describes them as artists, web designers, internet pioneers and, above all, talented social networkers. In this sense, the Consume model has attracted a wide range of people with different backgrounds and skills. These included hackers, programmers, artists, engineers, operating system developers, "network wizards", social entrepreneurs, technology activists and curators.

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"Feeling of network freedom" took hold

In the years that followed, Consume members joined forces with other international groups to experiment with modern mesh network technology and spread it. In such meshed WLAN cells, each node that joins the mesh network recognizes its own network environment. It automatically networks with other open routers to organically expand the local network. Participants can share local resources and communicate directly with each other without leaving their own community infrastructure. They only use the commercial Internet via traditional providers to communicate with the outside world.

"The feeling of network freedom spread quickly," Burns and Grassmuck describe the spirit that was spreading at the time. "First we conquer the neighborhood, then the world," was the motto. Medosch himself sees signs that this spirit will one day prevail on a large scale: "Our mesh network device does not (yet) cover the whole of society," he writes. However, Consume's in-house development is widely used by technicians who set up wireless community networks. It not only enables "discursive

behavior". Behind this are "also a series of convictions and material attitudes".

"Decentralization was at the heart of the idea, both politically and technologically," says Medosch, naming one of the anchors of the network commons. Geographically, the approach of the Consume self-sufficiency network "became established throughout the UK and Europe within a few years". The internationalization of the network commons manifested itself above all at the BerLon meeting in Berlin in 2002. The foundation stone for Freifunk was laid at this conference, which had the usual workshop character for Consume and was attended by like-minded people from the UK, Germany, Denmark and Austria.

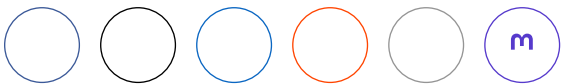
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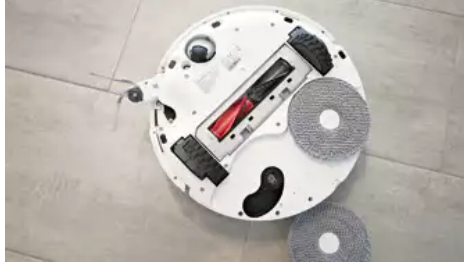
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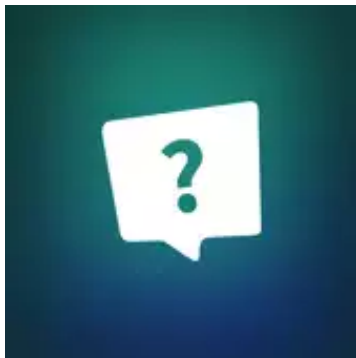


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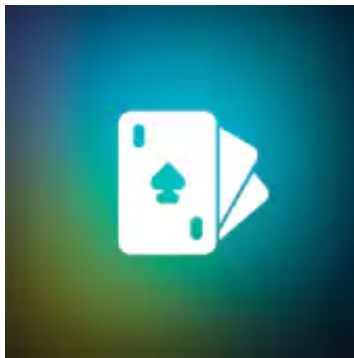
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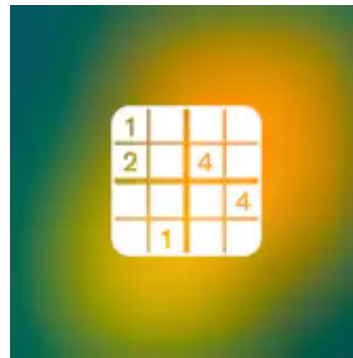
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