The Belly of the City. Alternative Communicative City Networks

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Do you know the battle between the Fat and the Thin, he [Claude] asked? Florent, surprised, said no. [...] In this struggle he detected the entire drama of human life, and he ended up classifying humans into the Fat and the Thin, in two antagonistic groups, one of which devours the other, which has its belly grow round and enjoys itself. [...] We belong to the Thin, the both of us. Tell me, with our flat bellies, we don't take away much room from the sunlight. Florent looked at the shades they left, and smiled. (Zola, The belly[1] of Paris, 1991 [1873], 255 – my translation)

Contested city identities

Cities have been given many different names, which all cover specific ideologist claims and futurist perspectives. Pacione's (2001: 590-596) overview mentions the green city, the dispersed city, the compact city, the regional city, the network city (linked to the world city and later the global city), the informational city and the virtual city. As this non-limitative list already indicates, information-related perspectives on the city feature prominently, exemplified by

Castells' (1991) *The Informational City*. In this predecessor of his *The Rise of the Network Society* trilogy, he already sees 'the emergence of information processing as the core, fundamental activity conditioning the effectiveness and productivity of all processes of production, distribution, consumption, and management.' (Castells, 1991: 10) Through these post-industrial mechanisms, the city becomes more fluid in space and time, but at the same time the informational growth is juxtaposed to industrial decline and the degradation of a (part of) the work force, which generates a diversity of urban spaces and lifestyles. Eventually, this leads to what Pacione's (2001: 638) summarises as 'a city that acts as a focus for information flows, via high-technology media, and has a large proportion of the labour force employed in those service industries based on the manipulation of information (such as banking, insurance and legal services).'

In contrast to these concepts, the relatively new(er) concept of the communicative city introduces a very different normative perspective, as exemplified by Kunzmann's (1997: 28) early description of the communicative city: 'New information and communication technologies could and should be used more skillfully to meet local and regional information needs, and to supply regional residents with the kind of civic information they require to live comfortably in an active community. Both access to information and opportunities to use various communication technologies are

required to initiate and maintain critical discussions on the future of a city region, to create local identity and civic pride, and to enhance participation in and commitment to urban development.'

Although this description is still very much focussed on urban planning, it does allow highlighting a number of dimensions that characterise the communicative city. A first aspect refers to the social dimension of communication, where the residents of the city enter into 'discussions', interactions and dialogues, facilitated by 'various communication technologies' in a variety of interconnected communicative urban spaces, a process which generates social cohesion and 'active communities'. Secondly, Kunzmann's description of the communicative city also incorporates a political dimension. Of course, the emphasis on 'critical discussions' already articulates the communicative city as political, keeping Dahlgren's (1995: 19) words in mind: 'from the standpoints of democracy, it is imperative not to lose sight of the classic idea that democracy resides, ultimately, with citizens who engage in talk with each other.' Moreover, the political dimension in Kunzmann's definition is strengthened by his reference to a needs-based perspective of civic information provision, and to the processes of access and participation (or 'opportunities to use'). On the downside, Kunzmann's approach to the political is also restrictive, as participation is very much limited to urban development, and needs to be expanded on a number of levels.

This required definitory expansion first of all relates the broadening of the scope of participation, combining the presence of a participatory network of public spaces with a participatory and decentralised decision-making structure. Secondly, the organised nature of the 'active community' also needs to be made explicit, avoiding a neo-liberal citizen-state dichotomy and increasing the weight of civil society in the communicative city. Thirdly, the political dimension of the communicative city needs to be complemented with two other (related) dimensions: the ethical and the spatial. The ethical-political dimension refers to one of the other conditions of possibility of the communicative city, which is that its needs to be tolerant, open, and respectful towards diversity. Finally, the spatial-political dimension refers to the spatial component of this openness and to the interconnectedness with non-city spaces. The communicative city's walls are porous, as its communicational focus transcends the city in order to establish (communicative) connections with its outside, without losing its proper identity, as is captured by Appadurai's (1995) concept of the translocal.

The comparison between the concepts of the informational and the communicative city only exemplify that urban identities are not fixed, but are the objects of the permanent struggles of the politics of representation. Authors like Shields (1996) and Tagg (1996) have pointed to the importance of representational regimes and discursive processes in producing the city, its inhabitants and

its communities, emphasising that these urban representations are contingent and open to contestation. In these struggles the official and hegemonic culture of the city is sometimes temporally resisted by carnavalesque attempts to reclaim the streets (Jordan, 2002), or by the creation of (semi-)temporary autonomous zones (Bey, 1985), but also by the more permanent presence of lower class cultures and popular cultures (Fiske, 1989). Through these contestations the concept of the city oscillates between the homogeneous and the heterogeneous, between the stable and the instable, between the formal and the informal. Without romanticising the belly of the city, and without generating a dichotomy between the official culture of the city and its alternatives, this oscillatory process is seen to construct the identity of the city and its communicative nature, as both sets of worlds feed into each other. At the same time, the alternative communicative culture of the city often remains invisible, and its influence is frequently ignored.

One of the spheres where this oscillatory process is situated is the (local) media scene, where dominant media structures and practices are combined with more alternative media that often remain hidden but still form alternative communicative spaces, which also contribute to the definition and viability of the communicative city. Given their importance for the communicative city (and its participatory-political dimensions) this article aims to show the potential of alternative media to structurally contribute to

the communicative city. The argument will be first based on an overview of alternative media theory, and the importance attributed to the participatory and the translocal. Secondly, a small case study on Antwerp and Brussels community-WiFi projects will be developed, in order to illustrate the importance of these projects in strengthening the communicative democracy of the cities in which they are located.

Alternative media organisations

Alternative media are - despite their diversity and complexity - often strongly embedded within their localities and communities, and the city remains a relevant setting as many of the worlds' cities have witnessed the development of community or alternative media serving their urban communities. Without desiring to exclude rural community media - which play a crucial role in many parts of the world – cities have generated fruitful biotopes for many of these media organisations. But as is claimed here, these alternative media organisations also contribute to the democratic-communicative quality of the city, and form a vital component of the communicative city.

The identity of these alternative media is not easy to grasp, as the label 'alternative media' covers a wide variety of organisational structures, participatory practices, and produced content. During its long theoretical and empirical tradition,

alternative media studies have struggled intensely with a number of highly elusive concepts (for a more elaborate discussion on alternative media theory, see Carpentier et al., 2003; Bailey et al., 2007). In the case of alternative media, the multiplicity of alternative media organisations has caused most mono-theoretical approaches to focus on certain characteristics, while ignoring other aspects of the identity of alternative media. In order to at least limit the impact of this theoretical problem, it is necessary to use a complementary set of different approaches towards the definition of alternative media (see Figure 1).

Traditional alternative media theory is built on media-centred models as it focuses on the links of these media organisations to a community (approach 1) and on their alternativeness (approach 2). The first approach uses a more essentialist theoretical framework, stressing the importance of the community the medium is serving, while the alternative media models focus on the relationship between alternative and mainstream media, putting more emphasis on the discursive relation of interdependency between two antagonistic sets of identities. These traditional models for theorising the identity of alternative media are complemented here with two more society-centred approaches[2]. The third approach defines alternative media as part of civil society. In order to incorporate the more relationist aspects of civil society theory - articulated by for instance Walzer (1998) – they are combined with

Downing's (2001) and Rodriguez' (2001) critiques on alternative media, and radicalised and unified in the fourth approach, which builds on the Deleuzian metaphor of alternative media as rhizome. This approach allows (even more) incorporating aspects of contingency, fluidity and elusiveness in the analysis of alternative media.

These four approaches are summarised in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Positioning the four theoretical approaches

	Media-centred	**Society-centred**
Autonomous identity of AM (Essentialist)	Approach I: Serving the community	
Identity of AM in relation to other identities (Relationalist)	Approach II: An alternative to mainstream	Approach III: Part of civil society Approach IV: Rhizome

Based on: Carpentier et al., 2003: 53

When further elaborating the four ideal-typical approaches[3], we can see that in the first approach the alternative media's role towards the community is emphasised. Alternative media serve a specific – often geographically defined[4] – community, and thus validate and strengthen that community. Secondly, access by the

community and participation of the community (and its constituent subgroups) are to be considered key-defining factors. 'Ordinary people'[5] are given the opportunity to have their voices heard. Topics that are considered relevant for the community can be discussed by members of that community, thus empowering those people by signifying that their statements are considered important enough to be broadcast.

The second approach to defining alternative media is based on the concept of alternativeness, where it is emphasised that being the 'third voice' (Servaes, 1999: 260) or the 'third type' (Girard, 1992: 2) is still a viable option for media organisations. This concept is built on a distinction between mainstream (public and commercial) media on the one hand and alternative media on the other, where alternative media are defined in a negative relationship towards mainstream media. This approach allows stressing that alternative media have alternative ways of organising (often using a more horizontal structure), carry alternative discourse and representations, and make use of alternative formats and genres. Participation also plays a crucial role, as through the mechanism of self-representation this multiplicity of alternative voices is accomplished.

In the third (society-centred) approach alternative media organisations are seen as part of civil society, a societal segment considered crucial for the viability of democracy. Alternative media

can firstly be seen as an 'ordinary' part of civil society, as one of the many types of organisations active in the field of civil society. The democratisation *of* media, as Wasko and Mosco (1992: 7) call this, allows citizens to be active in one of many (micro-)spheres relevant to daily life and to exert their rights to communicate. Alternative media also contribute to what Wasko and Mosco (1992: 13) call the democratisation *through* media, as they can offer different societal groups and communities the opportunity for extensive participation in public debate and for self-representation in public spaces, thus entering the realm of enabling and facilitating macro-participation.

The rhizomatic approach to alternative media (see Figure 2) uses Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) metaphor to radicalise approach 2 and 3, by focusing on three aspects: their role as a crossroads of civil society, their elusiveness, and their interconnections and linkages with market and state. Alternative media are often part of large civil society networks, and act as meeting points and catalysts for variety of organisations and movements. Both their embeddedness in a fluid civil society (as part of a larger network) and their antagonistic relationship towards the state and the market (as alternatives to mainstream public and commercial media) make the identity of alternative media highly elusive and fluid. In this approach it is argued that this elusiveness and contingency, which are 'typical' for a rhizome, are their main defining elements. And like rhizomes, alternative media tend to cut across borders and

build linkages between pre-existing gaps. In the case of alternative media, these connections apply not only to the pivotal role alternative media (can) play in civil society. They also apply to the linkages alternative media (and other civil organisations) can establish with (segments of) the state and the market, without losing their proper identity and becoming incorporated and/or assimilated.

Figure 2: Civil society and alternative media as rhizome
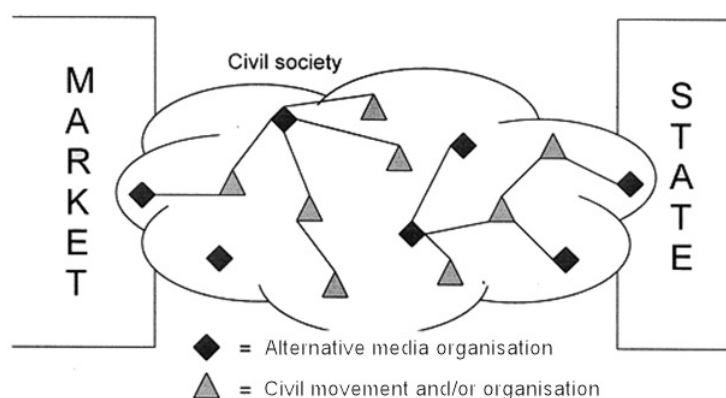
Based on: Carpentier et al., 2003: 62

The participatory and the translocal

If we return to the discussion on the communicative city, and especially its spatial and ethical-political dimensions, we can highlight two crucial characteristics of alternative media that also contribute to the communicative city. One of these characteristics is omnipresent in alternative media theory, as it can be seen as one of the most defining components of alternative media. A less often

debated second characteristic is the ability of alternative media to move into the translocal. Because of their rhizomatic nature, combined with their confinement to the local (and often the urban), alternative media play key roles in opening up the frontiers between the city and its outsides, without giving up on their local embeddedness. As is argued before, this porousness of the city walls is one of the structuring components of the communicative city.

Participation

In the case of alternative media, the relationship between the medium and the actual community often transcends 'ordinary' one-way communication, where 'topics are chosen in the same way, by professional communicators, and targeted towards the apparent needs and interests of the audience' (Berrigan 1979: 7). As is illustrated in AMARC's (1994 – see endnote 4) working definition (especially in stating that community media should be 'promoting the participation of this community'), relationships between broadcaster and community are defined by the concept of two-way communication. Here, the concepts of access and participation become crucial (Carpentier, 2007a).

Participation is, following Pateman (1970: 71), seen as a process in which the individual members (of a decision-making process) have a certain degree of power to influence or determine

the outcome of that process. She defines partial participation as 'a process in which two or more parties *influence* each other in the making of decisions but the final *power* to decide rests with one party only' (Pateman 1970: 70, emphasis added), whereas full participation is seen as 'a process where each individual member of a decision-making body has equal *power* to determine the outcome of decisions' (Pateman 1970: 71, emphasis added). When focussing more explicitly on the media's role in facilitating participation, the analysis becomes more complicated, as we need to distinguish between participation *in* the media and *through* the media, similar to the way in which Wasko and Mosco (1992: 7) distinguished between democratisation *in* and *through* the media. Both participation *in* the media and *through* the media see the (mass) communicative process not as a series of practices that are restrictively controlled by media professionals, but as a human right that cuts across entire societies. Participation *in* the media deals with the participation of non-professionals in the production of media output (content-related participation) and in media decision-making (structural participation). Participation *through* the media deals with how citizens (organised or not) can communicate their views, represent themselves and enter into deliberations and debates in a series of mediated public spaces. These forms of (macro-) participation are of course extensively theorised in the

more ritualistic approaches towards media in general (Carey, 1989; see also Couldry, 2002).

Although mainstream media have attempted to organise forms of audience participation (Livingstone and Lunt, 1994; McNair et al., 2003; Carpentier 2003a)[6], alternative media in particular have proven to be more successful in organising more intense and radical forms of participation in the media, whether online or offline (Girard 1992; Downing et al. 2001; Rodriguez 2001; Bailey et al., 2007). This position is exemplified by Berrigan, who claims that access by the community, and the participation of the community should be considered key defining factors for alternative media: 'They are media in which the community participates, as planners, producers, performers. They are the means of expression of the community, rather than for the community' (Berrigan 1979: 8). Prehn (1992: 259) describes the practical consequences of these more intense forms of participation as follows: 'participation implies a wider range of activities related to involving people directly in station programming, administration and policy activities'.

Two perspectives have had a fundamental impact on these more radical meanings of access and participation: Freire's dialogical pedagogy and the debates in the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) about access, participation and self-management in the 1970s. Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970) is aimed against the traditional

educational system, which he regards paternalistic and non-participative. Despite his focus on the educational process and the struggle against illiteracy and injustice, in which minimal account is taken of the (mass) media context, Freire's theory has had a considerable impact within the domain of participatory communication. The main reason for this is that he situates participation in a context of reduction in power imbalances, at both the broad social, political and economic levels (the relations between oppressors and repressed), and at the level of the education system.

A second perspective was initiated at the UNESCO debates in the 1970s about the New World Information and Communication Order (NWICO) with the plea for a 'free and balanced flow of information', which positioned the right to communicate at its very centre (MacBride, et al. 2004 [1980]). In the UNESCO debates on the NWICO clear definitions of (the distinction between) access and participation were formulated. While their definition of access stressed the availability of opportunities to choose relevant programmes and to have a means of feedback, participation implied 'a higher level of public involvement … in the production process and also in the management and planning of communication systems' (Servaes 1999: 85, see MacBride et al. 2004 [1980]).

The role of the concepts of access and participation in alternative media is linked to the above-discussed four models (see

Figure 1). The community media model (approach 1) allows emphasising that the participating audiences are often situated within specific communities, allowing their voices to be heard. Especially societal groups that are misrecognised, disadvantaged, stigmatised, or even repressed can benefit from using the channels of communication opened by community media, strengthening their internal identity, manifesting this identity to the outside world, and thus enabling social change and/or development. The model of alternativeness (approach 2) first points to the organisational-structural differences, as alternative media are more horizontally structured (and participatory) Secondly, alternative discourses are generated through the participation of a variety of people, where opportunities are provided 'to local cultural manifestations, to ethnic minority groups, to the hot political issues in the neighbourhood or locality' (Jankowski, 1994: 3). The orientation of alternative media towards giving voice to various (older and newer) social movements, minorities, and sub/counter-cultures, and the emphasis on self-representation can in turn signify the multiplicity of societal voices. In the civil society model (approach 3) alternative media are deemed important not just because they are part of civil society which facilitates the societal participation of the citizens, but also because they contribute to the democratisation through the media. Alternative media can overcome the absolutist interpretation of media neutrality and impartiality, and offer different societal groups

and communities the opportunity for extensive participation in public debate and for self-representation in the (or a) public space, thus entering the realm of enabling and facilitating macro-participation. Finally, in the rhizomatic model (approach 4) both the diversity of participatory practices and the capacity to generate links between participatory organisations is emphasised. Also the rhizome's capacity to inject its participatory (and potentially deterritorialising) discourses into the more rigid (mainstream media) systems – as is for instance happening now with Web2.0 and UGC (Carpentier, 2007b) – is highlighted in these models.

Translocalism

Translocalism is a much less-theorised characteristic of alternative media, but at the same time crucial to understanding the spatial-political dimension of the communicative city. Traditionally, alternative media are closely linked to the notion of locality. Alternative media are most often seen as small-scale and highly localised media organisations. The possibility of a sustained existence of large-scale and global alternative media is equally often put into question or even considered virtually unthinkable. This dominant mode of locality can be explained by the emphasis it receives in the interconnecting traditional media-centred approaches. The alternativeness approach uses large-scale

mainstream media as a reference point, almost automatically positioning alternative media on the other (small-scale) side of the binary. The community media approach draws on the dominant conceptualisations of community, which often refer to geography and ethnicity as structuring notions of collective identities or group relations. Through this focus on territorialised communities, the community media approach also tends to privilege the local.

The specificity of alternative media complicates their direct access to the global mediascapes. This does not imply that they are completely severed from the global. Similar to the above-described logics, the argument can be made that localised alternative media do not remain unaffected by the global. Here, Howley's (2005: 267) point that 'community media rather forcefully undermined the binary opposition of the categories "local" and "global" in two discrete, but interrelated ways' is relevant. He refers to the 'historicizing and particularizing [of] the penetration of global forces into local contexts' and to the 'endless stream of variation and diversity of cultural forms and practices around the world' generated by alternative media. Nevertheless the dominant mode of locality seems to keep alternative media firmly locked within its 'essence' of being small-scale and a part of the local community.

This confinement to the local also has a downside, as it structurally weakens alternative media in comparison to large-scale - and sometimes global - mainstream media. When they are so

small, it is difficult for them to play a societal role, which reduces their relevance. Moreover they become vulnerable in relation to the large mainstream media organisations and the political-regulative system. Quite often, they are simply invisible, not unlike one of Bey's (1985) Temporary Autonomous Zones. Paradoxically, their strength is also to be found in their being small-scaled. The close connection of alternative media with their respective local communities provides them with a diversity of content and collaborators. Their small scale makes them sensitive to the access and participation of their publics, and enables them to actually include more than token participatory practices, both at the level of content generation and management. In other words, it renders them alternatives to the mainstream.

This paradox, where the need for alternative media to (at least partially) overcome the local is combined with the equally important need to safeguard their local embeddedness also requires a theoretical reconfiguration. For this purpose, Appadurai's (1995) concept of the translocal can be put to work. The translocal allows theorising the moments where the local is effectively expanded by moving into the realm of the outer context, which is traditionally not considered to be part of the local. In the case of alternative media support is also found in the metaphor of the rhizome. Rhizomatic thought focuses on the heterogeneous and ever-changing interconnections, which are explicitly articulated against the arbolic

structures of state and market. From this perspective, there is no necessary reason why the rhizome should stop at the edge of the local community.

More specifically, I would like to (re-)introduce the notion of the translocal, inspired by the way Appadurai uses this concept in his 1995 book chapter *The production of locality.* In this chapter Appadurai deals with the complex interplay between locality – more specifically neighbourhoods - and context. He argues that context provides the constitutive outside of locality, but that locality simultaneously provides us with a context. To use his words: 'The central dilemma is that neighbourhoods both are contexts and at the same time *require and produce* contexts.' (Appadurai, 1995: 209 – emphasis in original). At the same time, the capacity of localities to produce their 'own' context and subjectivities is affected by the 'locality-producing capabilities of larger-scale formations (nation-states, kingdoms, missionary empires and trading cartels.)'[7] (Appadurai, 1995: 211) Slightly surprisingly, Appadurai uses the concept of the translocal only in the second part of this text, where he discusses the global production of locality, mainly through the nation-state. For that reason, he refers to the translocal as situated between the local and the nation-state, when he mentions the 'conflicting relation between neighbourhoods, translocal allegiances and the logic of the nation-state.' (Appadurai, 1995: 220). His

second reference to the translocal links it to the tourism industry, when he writes that:

> The ethnography of these tourist locations is just beginning to be written in detail, but what little we do know suggests that many of such locations create complex conditions for the production and reproduction of locality, in which ties of marriage, work, business and leisure weave together various circulating populations with kinds of 'locals' to create neighbourhoods which belong in one sense to particular nation-states, but are, from another point of view, what we might call *translocalities*. (Appadurai, 1995: 216 – emphasis in original)

Arguably, the concept of the translocal is at its strongest when it is combined with the first part of Appadurai's analysis, where he deals with the interaction between the local and its contexts (at whatever scale these contexts are situated). The translocal then becomes the moment when the local is stretched beyond its borders, whilst still remaining situated in the local. As Broeckmann (1998) puts it, it is the moment where 'different worlds and their local agents – individuals, organisations, machines – co-operate with global and nomadic agents within networked environments.' It is the moment where the local merges with a part of its outside context, without transforming itself into this context.

It is the moment where the local simultaneously incorporates its context and transgresses into it. It is the moment where the local reaches out to a familiar unknown, and fuses it with the known. It is – to use Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) words – the place-based version of the rhizome.

The translocal is not that different from the glocal (Robertson, 1995), as both concepts use fluid definitions of the local and the global, of place and space. One of the disadvantages of the concept of glocalisation is that it cannot distance itself from its genesis, still taking the global as its starting point for analysis and situating the local in a reactive position. In comparison to the glocal, the translocal implies an inversed approach that allows taking the local as the point of departure, and adding the global as a second component. In this way, translocalisation acts as glocalisation's mirror image. It allows us to retain the focus on the dynamics of the local and the global, but uses the local as a starting point, rendering it more active. As argued before, the translocal allows theorising the spatial-democratic dimension of the communicative city, through its emphasis on rhizomatic openness and interconnection which avoids the essentialist closures of urban and civic identities.

A case study: the participatory and the translocal in two community Wi-Fi projects

As alternative media practices often remain hidden in the belly of the city, and are rarely publically valued (or even noticed) by official and legitimate city cultures, this part of the article aims to render one of the translocalised and participatory alternative urban practice more visible. The case study focuses on a slightly specific form of (alternative) media use, as community Wi-Fi (or community wireless networks) is very much aimed at providing internet access.

The advent of Wi-Fi has of course generated a wide variety of initiatives to provide wireless access. Barranca (2004) divided the initiatives that make use of the unlicensed spectrum into three categories, which surprisingly well fit the Gramscian state/market/civil society model. He names these three categories as follows: the community broadband networks, municipal wireless broadband and commercial wireless broadband. The apparent neutrality of this enumeration hides the antagonistic relationship between commercial Wireless Internet Service Providers (WISP) and community Wi-Fi, through which community Wi-Fi is partially defined, as for instance Flickenger's (2003: 6) statement illustrates:

> As difficult as the WISP nightmare example has made this idea sound, people everywhere are learning that they don't

necessarily need to pay their dues to the telco to make astonishing things happen.

Wireless activists built their first free-access networks through the 'triumph of unreflective accidents' (Sandvig, 2004: 591), where Wi-Fi hot spots came into being 'by default and not by design' (ibidem) as initially users did not always realise that they were granting 'strangers' access. Through a combination of primitive signs (a practice called warchalking – romantically linked to old U.S. hobo signs) and more sophisticated mapping database techniques (see for instance nodeDB.com), the open nodes can be traced and used. Despite a number of protective strategies (like the development of NoCatAuth[8]) the fear for abuse has limited the growth potential of community Wi-Fi, especially because WISPs have incessantly pointed to these risks. As Sandvig (2004: 591) argues: 'The problem has been that Wi-Fi, unlike air, is already understood as private property.' Through the discourse of thievery (and more specifically 'Wi-Fi-theft'), the commodification of the spectrum is also protected by the state; witness the court cases against 'Wi-Fi-thieves'[9]. This of course strongly contrasts with the gift economy of what Sandvig (2004: 591) calls the 'open wireless community'.

The problems related to the absence of mutual consent has led Wi-Fi activists to develop their own networks, permanently scouting for (opportunities for) new nodes to add them to these

networks. This has not structurally altered the participatory philosophy of community Wi-Fi, as is illustrated by the two main guiding principles of one of the Belgian groups (based in Brussels), RéseauCitoyen (2006 – emphasis in original and my translation):

> We claim that the *equality of citizens* is a principle that is unavoidable, and we engage ourselves to respect it. [...] The second principle defended by RéseauCitoyen is the establishment of a *citizen agora*, which has free access. That implies that the barriers that prevent access have to be as small as possible.

Both the involuntary and voluntary networks are characterised by their rhizomatic nature. The technology that supports the rhizome is often referred to as a mesh network, which is based on multiple and overlapping Wi-Fi access points, linked to each other in a dynamic and non-hierarchical way; a technological model which is fully integrated in the community Wi-Fi ideology. But the rhizomatic nature of community Wi-Fi is not restricted to a technological model as the nodes of the network not only consist of antennas, computers, and software, but also of organised individuals. Again, in some cases like RéseauCitoyen (2006 - my translation), the participatory mode of organisation shies away from hierarchal forms of decision-making, as is explained in their modus operandi:

We attempt to practice libertarianism by not having an institutionalised decision-making structure. That doesn't imply that no decision is taken. It does mean that the decision-making procedure, and the implementation of these decisions, is nobody's and (even more) everybody's business. Leadership by example becomes the privileged way to propose and implement actions. No coercion is possible from 'the power.' Only the consensus perdures. No collective decisions, but the collective result of individual actions.

Other organisations – like Wireless Antwerpen – are structured more on the basis of an expert model, which brings along a more hierarchical form of decision-making. But even in these cases the hierarchies remain fairly horizontally structured, as these organisations are still staffed by volunteers, which reduces the abilities for top-down control. Despite the variations in organisational structures and cultures, these community Wi-Fi organisations provide the backbone of this alternative network. This (organised) core group is supported by an 'army of enthusiasts that never meet'[10] (Sandvig, 2004: 588), which engages in cooperative action. These enthusiasts and 'co-ops' are often even unknown to these organisations.

The embeddedness of community Wi-Fi organisations in local civil society as a resource for volunteers and capital, often positions

community Wi-Fi in local urban communities and gives them a clear urban dimension, where they establish rhizomatic connections between technologies and human beings. Given its preference for low power transmitters, community Wi-Fi tends to stop at the edges of the city, as the volunteer density decreases and distances increase.

To take the case of Wireless Antwerpen as an example, this not-for-profit organisation was initiated in 2003 by Stefan Lambrechts (as 'a hobby that got out of hand' - interview Stefan Lambrechts, July 11, 2007) and is based in an Antwerp suburb called Schoten. At the time of writing, the core group of Wireless Antwerpen consisted out of 3 people, with a support group of about 30, mostly amateur radio operators and Linux programmers. They now have about 30 nodes, 14 of which are situated in Antwerp, and three internet uplink points (with 20kB/user). The estimated number of daily users is 150 (interview Stefan Lambrechts, July 11, 2007).

Figure 3: One of the Antwerp Nodes of Wireless Antwerpen
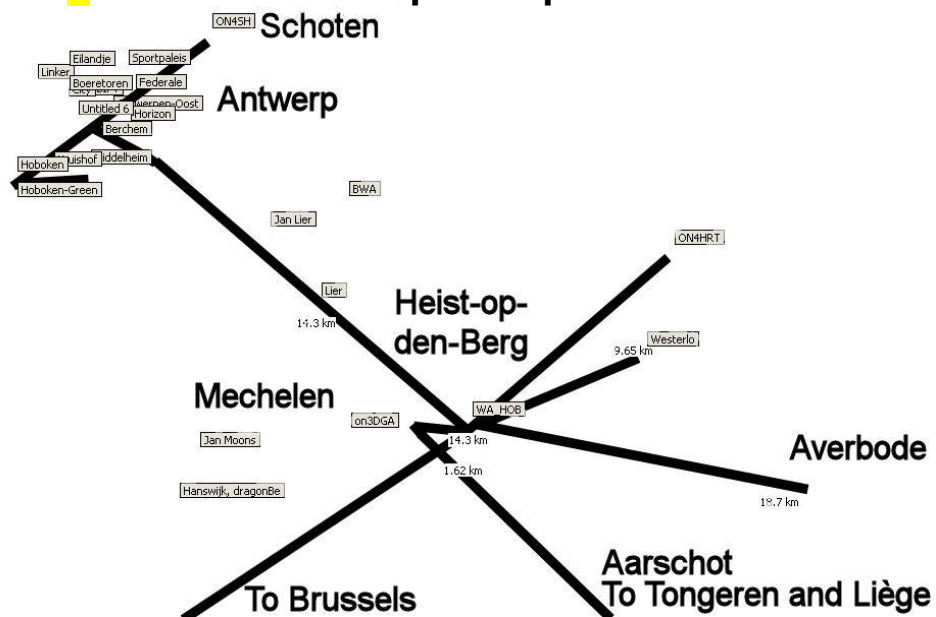

Wireless Antwerpen (2007)

But again, the rhizome does not have to stop at the edge of the local community. Interestingly, Wireless Antwerpen is run by a number of amateur radio operators, which has led to the introduction of elements of long-distance reach (which is characteristic for amateur radio culture) in the community Wi-Fi concept. This is symbolised by the variety of maps to be found on their website (see Figure 4), that do not make use of the *traditional* representation of mesh networks (via overlapping concentric circles), but all have linear connections between different nodes (located in different cities), with the distances clearly indicated. Exactly the fusion of both components (amateur radio broadcasting and Wi-Fi)

has led to a translocal community Wi-Fi network, with

interconnected nodes in different North Belgian cities, linking city to

city[11]. As Figure 5 shows, one of the nodes is located in Brussels,

near the Atomium.

Figure 4: Wireless Antwerpen maps

Wireless Antwerpen (2007) - By kind permission of Stefan Lambrechts, Wireless Antwerpen.

Figure 5: Node Atomium of Wireless Antwerpen

Wireless Antwerpen (2007) - By kind permission of Stefan Lambrechts, Wireless Antwerpen.

Despite its translocal potential, community Wi-Fi is (not unlike other alternative media) struggling for survival, as it has to face the ever-present commercial internet. Sandvig (2004: 596) refers to the redundancy problem, where community Wi-Fi is reduced to the role of a *second Internet*. This reduces – again according to Sandvig (2004: 597) - the map building to an *aesthetic project* and the entire community Wi-Fi endeavour to a *community-building hobby*.

These problems are further strengthened by the problems alternative media organisations often face. As most alternative media, community Wi-Fi remains vulnerable organisations,

dependant on a limited number of volunteers. As Stefan Lambrechts of Wireless Antwerpen puts it: 'If I disappear, the network will disappear.' Another problem area are the sometimes-antagonistic relationships with the market and state, discrediting or incorporating the community Wi-Fi project. For instance Wireless Antwerpen lost most of it inner-city nodes in Antwerp when a commercial 'competitor' had its lawyers contact the proprietors of these Wi-Fi antenna sites. Nevertheless community Wi-Fi remains a good example of the translocal (and in some cases of the participatory) communicative city, where Wi-Fi activist organisations remain firmly embedded in their local urban communities, providing wireless internet access to their local users, whilst at the same time bypassing (and even transgressing) these localities by connecting different local networks by reverting to the technologies, practices and cultures of radio amateur broadcasting.

Conclusion: the belly of the communicative city as democratic reservoir

Even in its early version (as theorised by Kunzmann), the social dimension of the communicative city, which focuses on interaction within the urban communities, is complemented by a political dimension. Crucial to this political component is the participation of the communicative city's residents in a wide range of societal systems, including local politics, media and civil society. This article

claims that this political dimension of the communicative city also has ethical-political and spatial-political components, which allow us to define the communicative city as open, respectful and tolerant.

Through this political approach of the communicative city, the notion of participation becomes unavoidable, as the residents of the communicative city (in contrast to the informational city) are articulated as involved and empowered within the city's structures. The inside of the communicative city can only be articulated as open, respectful and tolerant if its residents are granted a relatively equal position within the different subsystems of the city. But this openness should not be confined to the inside of the city, but also relates to the relationship with the outside world, which has been termed the translocal. In other words, the community city also constructs an open and tolerant relationship with its outside, without giving up on its own locality (or inside). Both components – the participatory and the translocal - are interrelated, as the participatory principles that govern the inside can also be used to govern the relationship with the outside of the communicative city.

Of course, the communicative city is a normative model, and (only) a part of the representational regimes and discursive processes that attempt to produce the city. As such, it often conflicts with a variety of other discourses that are generated by official and legitimate city cultures, as these cultures (at this point in time) do not embrace the communicative city model. At the same

time, the communicative city model and the discursive struggle in which it is engulfed is not merely rhetorical, but it is also materialised through organisations that in turn generate discursive translations. A variety of civil society organisations can be seen as organisations that materialise the communicative city on a daily basis, without necessarily receiving much attention. Alternative media organisations are intrinsically part of this communicative-democratic reservoir, but also take a privileged position, as they are also one of the catalysts that connect a diversity of civil society organisations and individuals in a rhizomatic network.

As organisations, the two community WiFi projects not only show the complexity and hybridity of alternative media identities and practices, encapsulated in the four theoretical approaches discussed in this article, but also that the social, political, ethical and spatial principles of the communicative city exist and can be put into practice. Here, the normative does meet social practice. Moreover, these practices (and the model they put into practice) can be used to deterritorialise (or enrich) official city cultures. Secondly, the case study shows the importance of the participatory and translocal, and again are these organisations the living evidence that these concepts can be put into practice. The participatory is (at least within alternative media theory) a taken for granted concept, but its realisation always remains an exceptional endeavour, leading to a diversity of hybrid variations. It is more

than ironic that these little treasures of participatory (media) culture can often only be found within the belly of city. This applies even more for the translocal, which has turned out to be very difficult to translate into practice, but which can be found in embryonic forms in alternative media projects.

The case study most of all shows that the belly of the city, the world of alternative, participatory and translocal projects and experiments is vital to understand the concept and the practices related to the communicative city. Moreover, their existence is a permanent reminder that the communicative city already exists, and simply needs to be rediscovered by looking in the hidden corners of the belly of the city.

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Endnotes

[1] Zola's metaphor of the belly is multilayered, as it refers to the belly of the bourgeoisie, but also to the underground of the city. In this article, the latter meaning is used.

[2] The object of this article – alternative media - of course complicates an unequivocal society-centred approach. Instead this type of approach should be interpreted as the societal contextualisation of (alternative) media.

[3] These four approaches also allow describing many of the problems and threats that alternative media face. For an analysis of these problems and threats, see Carpentier et al. (2003).

[4] In for instance Amarc-Europe's (1994) definition of community media, the geographical aspect is explicitly highlighted: '*a 'non-profit' station, currently broadcasting, which offers a service to the community in which it is located, or to which it broadcasts, while promoting the participation of this community in the radio*'. Nevertheless, also other types of relationships between medium and community are implied when Amarc-Europe uses the phrase '*to which it broadcasts*'.

[5] In other words: people who are not part of a societal elite (including politicians, academics, captains of industry, and media professionals) and those not considered being celebrities.

[6] The British television and web project, 'Video Nation', illustrates that the obstacles can be effectively reduced when the involved media professionals adopt an open, honest, respectful, process-oriented and (micro-)participatory attitude, based on a thorough analysis of the power processes and imbalances (Carpentier, 2003).

[7] Appadurai illustrates this point through the relationship of Yanomami groups in the rainforests of Brazil and Venezuela, with the nation-states in which they (have to) live. As this example might take me too far from the point I want to raise, I will not go into this specific analysis.

[8] NoCat Authentication allows for user identification, in order to increase (community Wi-Fi) network security, see http://nocat.net/.

[9] See for instance: http://www.techdirt.com/articles/20070417/112235.shtml.

[10] Although there are attempts to bring these user communities together (see for instance http://wifi.meetup.com/).

[11] These cities are Beerzel, Brussel (Atomium), Diest, Herentals, Herk de Stad, Heist o/d Berg, Lier, Tielt-Winge and Tongeren are mentioned on the Wireless Antwerpen website.