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Taming PedoBear

The structures of the cultural fringe, hyperspace jumping, and the loop of capital

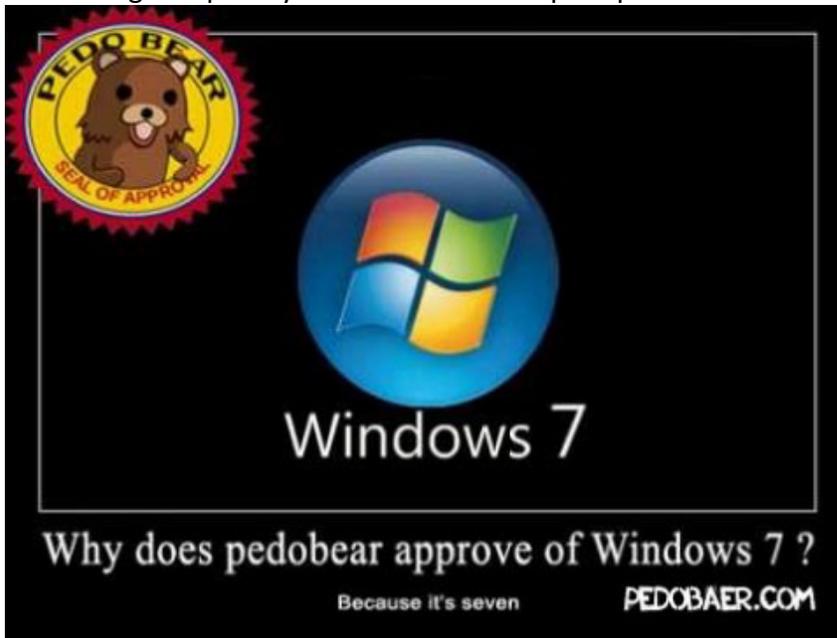
Nicolás Mendoza
347170

"Whatever code we hack, be it programming language, poetic language, math or music, curves or colourings, we create the possibility of new things entering the world. Not always great things, or even good things, but new things. In art, in science, in philosophy and culture, in any production of knowledge where data can be gathered, where information can be extracted from it, and where in that information new possibilities for the world are produced, there are hackers hacking the new out of the old."

- Mc Kenzie Wark, Hacker Manifesto [Version 4.0]

A Police Report

Something curious happened during the 2010 Comic Con convention in San Diego. In the midst of an event full of zombies, super villains, and in general an endless diversity of monstrous creatures, a bear that was giving free candy was taken away for interrogation by the local police. It was of course PedoBear, a cartoon character whose signature trait is to be a pedophile. PedoBear is a fictional character created by the users of 4chan, an online community which will be described later in this essay. According to the report issued by the Tulsa Police Department Child Exploitation Unit, *"PedoBear is and should be associated with the Internet and paedophiles/sexually-preferential offenders who reportedly use him to communicate their interests in young children to each other (sic)."*¹ The assessment is wrong; the true function of PedoBear is something completely different to be the pedophiles' shibboleth.



A pedobear joke. Source: *Pedobaer.com*

¹ http://www.fox23.com/media/lib/13/8/9/e/89e7d3ab-16aa-4690-a996-cc7b4a9a049c/PedoBear_PUBLIC_INFO_Bulletin1.pdf

To get arrested is perhaps the ultimate feat for PedoBear; because it is a joke meant to humour its internet audience through its obnoxiousness, arrest is the pinnacle of success. PedoBear is so insidiously disturbing to mainstream sensibility that it's irreversibly beyond the commodifiable: what brand could possibly endorse PedoBear? App store approval of a PedoBear app is unthinkable. Pedophilia is perhaps the ultimate taboo in contemporary societies, especially in western contemporary societies, which situates PedoBear jokes at the very border of what is illegal. This is precisely the reason why 4Chan created PedoBear. It is what in 4Chan's language constitutes *trolling*, meaning something that might disturb or enrage someone, therefore infusing it with the potential of laughter, better known as *the lulz*. PedoBear, if we go by the Tulsa Police report, would represent in foucaultian terms a sort of contemporary icon of uber-abnormality (Foucault 2003). A monster that masturbates to child pornography from the outer regions of the internet, outskirts that by the way might now always be physically located next door.

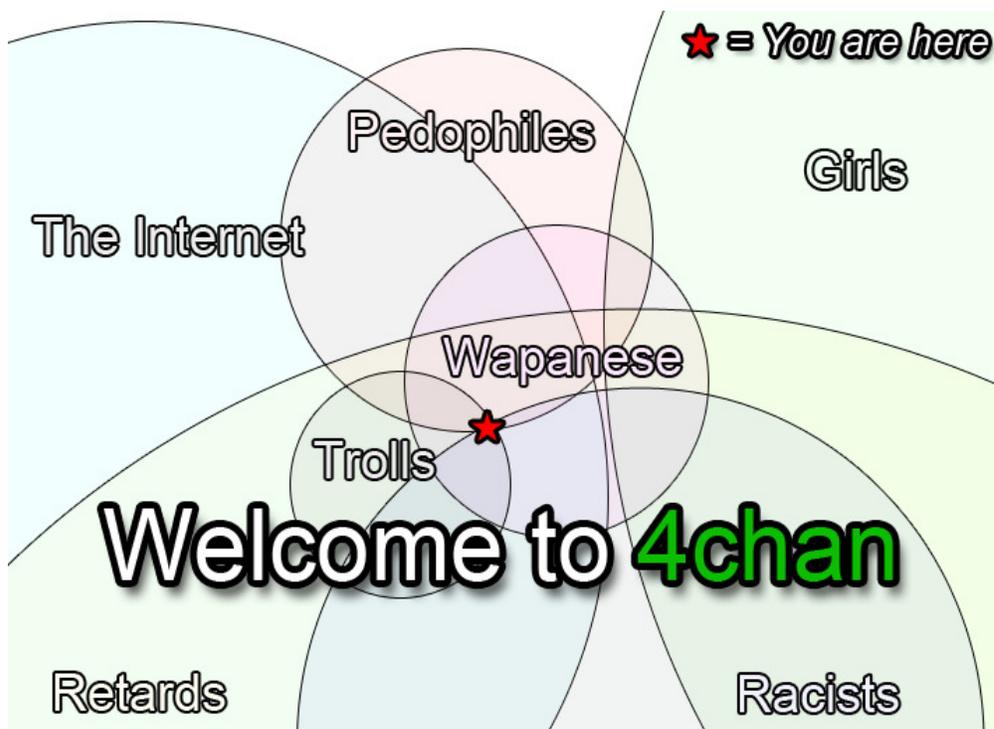
What it really signals, though, is a fundamental clash of the center² and the fringe of contemporary culture. PedoBear is one of countless iterations of a vibrant digital fringe, an unprecedented source of cultural production that seems to be situated outside of the regular conducts: those regulated by governments and exploited by corporations in order to standardize identity and stimulate consumption. What is unprecedented is not only the method but also the subject of production. The method and subject are one: the collaborating community. PedoBear is an open provocation from the rogue episteme of the collaborating community, and therefore it is not only incomprehensible to the corporate episteme, but more importantly, it is repressed, excluded and policed; handbook procedure on how to deal with all cultural production that cannot possibly be absorbed into corporate imagery.

This essay seeks to raise questions about the fringe and center of contemporary cultural production, their relationship, and the tactics employed by the center to renormalize, absorb, and recuperate the productions of the fringe. This periphery finds in the internet, when it wants, the tools to a collaborative expression that can aspire to be located outside of the hegemonic episteme. These tactics of recuperation are not only to repress (as PedoBear's story shows), but also to purchase, and to sanitize through the hypnotizing exercise of the spectacular.

² Which is diffuse because, it is composed of any one and all of the thousands of media outlets owned by major media conglomerates like Disney, News Corp, Viacom, Sony, Time Warner, etc.

Of Digital Aesthetics

MIT's Technology Review Magazine describes 4Chan in the following terms: "*The site is what's known as an image board, a type of online message forum that encourages users to post both images and text (...) their content tending in the aggregate toward a unique mix of humor, pornography, offensiveness, and, at times, borderline legality*" (Dibell 2010). Its important to note that 4Chan goes beyond 'encouraging the posting of images'; what is really encouraged is the creation of images whether by remixing images posted by other users or by producing altogether new ones. The result is a sort of semiotic big-bang, a lab that witnesses frenetic experimentation of meaning; ever twisting it, ever questioning its own assumptions. It is safe to say that there is no 4Chan joke that is not to some degree making fun of its own creators.



4Chan by 4Chan³: Venn diagram joke -there are no girls on the internet (among other jokes).

Perhaps the most interesting feature of 4Chan as a semiotic lab, other than the powerful blend of text and image, is the idea of anonymity. The site goes to great lengths to level the identity field at zero. Anonymity is easily misinterpreted as the mark of the dubious "*having two identities for yourself is an example of a lack of integrity*" Facebook's Zuckerberg once said (Ibid.). But, anonymity (as Wikileaks knows) enables

³ Source: Encyclopedica Dramatica

resistance. Through anonymity fear recedes. Because identity is left at the door, hierarchy, reputation and intellectual property are irrelevant. The notion of the author is abolished. It is impossible to determine who created PedoBear; it was just 4Chan. Further, it is impossible for anyone to claim authorship of PedoBear; it is a *de facto* commons.

For the average individual, visiting 4Chan and particularly its main forum called simply "/b/", can be either repulsive or disappointing. Its language, whether graphic or textual is distasteful to our preconstructed sensibilities. But we can't fully understand the true state of contemporary culture, and the future of cultural production (that scary euphemism), if we don't understand 4chan. But 4Chan does not feel any need to be easily understood. Its autonomous project requires a stage of disorientation because it has its own language; after all, how can autonomy be claimed while using the language of the oppressors? How can a new epistemological commons come to be if not by the crafting of an alternative language? Early impressionist paintings were abhorred as well, they were thought to be an insult to the high art of painting because they were being read through the very categories that were being subverted. The digital fringe solves this problem by establishing a parallel knowledge apparatus, analogous to the one that currently dictates reality: knowledge regarding this branching episteme of the anonymous collective is articulated in its own terms in the website called *Encyclopedia Dramatica*⁴. This two sites constitute a sort of strategic node in the commons of internet aesthetics.

Perhaps 4Chan is not exactly what Sean Cubitt had in mind when interrogating digital aesthetics, but it is certainly a model that seems to hold its ground against the 'insidious blandness' of the corporate site:

"Digital aesthetics needs both to come up with something far more interesting than corporate sites, and to act critically to point up their insidious blandness and global ambitions. Subversion of the dominant is inadequate. In its place, it is essential to imagine a work without coherence, without completion and without autonomy. Such a work, however, must also be able to take on the scale of the cyborg culture, a scale beyond the individual, and outside the realm of the hyperindividuated subject. By the same token, aesthetics must move beyond the organic unity of the art object and embrace the social process of making."
Emphases mine. (Cubitt 1998 p. 142)

Just like in an anime film, perhaps its a bunch of teenagers connected to computers who might end up saving the world. Probably without ever reading a word of Lovink,

⁴ <http://encyclopediadramatica.com>

the 4Chan community has (using the name Anonymous) become the foremost tactical media collective in the world. Their self description is both powerful and articulate:

"We aren't some vigilante group righting wrongs. We aren't your friends, your buddies or your saviors. Your feelings mean nothing to us. We are human nature unencumbered by pointless ethics, foolish moralities or arbitrary laws and restrictions. We are every dark impulse you have; unrestrained and fully realized. We are what deep down, you wish you were. We exist as a means for instant gratification, purely at our own whim. We have no culture, we have no laws, written or otherwise. We are an autonomous collective, each an insignificant part of a whole. You cannot assimilate us, we do not change. You cannot defeat us, we do not exist. You cannot infiltrate us, we know our own. We do not sleep, we do not eat and we do not feel remorse. We will tear you apart from outside and in, we have all the time in the world. You operate under the delusion that we will someday be outdated, that we might even see the light. You are irrevocably wrong."

-Encyclopedia Dramatica⁵

Is this real? Is this even possible? Even though Benkler has been labeled as too optimistic, his vision of a web that "*provides an outlet for contrary expression and a medium for shaking what we accept as cultural baseline assumptions*" (Benkler 2006, p. 278) seems confirmed by the emergence of a group with the disturbing potential of Anonymous. PedoBear, an icon created despite the corporate strangulation of culture, shows how the collaborative community provides "*greater freedom to participate effectively in defining the cultural symbols of our day*" (Ibid.). In 4Chan images evolve in a turbulent cauldron where there seem to be no proven patterns; any doodle or any iteration of past images might very well morph into a new lasting trend that evolves in an equally unpredictable way.

The favorite tactic of capital is of course capital, probably because it is so easy to confuse capital with logic. When capital succeeds in purchasing the fringe its logic gets stronger. In 2008, the Wall Street Journal published an article circumscribing 4Chan to the logic of capital:

"In contrast to other startups that have amassed millions of dollars in seed money from investors, 4chan is a modest operation. Mr. Poole makes money from advertising and the occasional donation drive. He says the site breaks even, but won't release the site's revenue figures. His only paid staff member is his programmer. "He makes more money than I do," says Mr. Poole."⁶

⁵ <http://encyclopediadramatica.com/Anon>

⁶ <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB121564928060441097.html>

This is of course portrayed by the WSJ as a problem in absolute terms, but ‘Mr. Poole’ (Christopher, founder of 4Chan) has realized that capital can only harm, because if the community is commodified its creativity ceases to exist. Therefore, only the most spartan advertising is used to pay for operating costs.

Going Downtown



PedoBear makes the news!

Key to this essay is the idea that this imagery is not contained and endlessly reconfigured exclusively inside the 4Chan node, or any or the other peripheral cultural nodes of which 4Chan is merely the paradigm. The vapours of the 4Chan cauldron float freely through the web, through other media, and often into physical reality. To continue abusing the PedoBear example, he (it?) not only was exploited by Fox News to fuel parent's paranoia⁷, but, more comically, was mistakenly printed in a Canadian newspaper in an article about the Winter Olympics mascots.

Fully mapping or theorizing these flows is beyond this essay, but two major points are to be noted.

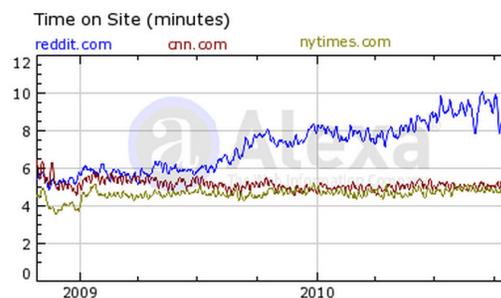
⁷ <http://www.fox23.com/news/local/story/Pedobear-The-New-Pedophile/jcdOrr1dzU2Pbv12JE4qZw.csp>

First, that this process of flow is a) sanitising, gradually discarding the most obnoxious aspects of the content, and b) transformative: at the same time as some of the content is discarded (as it is *curated*) by realms that are less daring, more commercial, or more 'family oriented', this very realms find themselves dealing anyway with a new language which is in a gradual process of adoption that subtly transforms them.

Second, that taxonomy of autonomy is possible within these secondary realms. While 4Chan is outside of the corporate cultural production, it is at the center of a hybrid mediascape that features different degrees of epistemic autonomy. That is why PedoBear printed as an Olympic symbol in the newspaper is a step above in humour than his Comic Con appearance. This taxonomies encompass the media as a global phenomenon and, as we will see next, are determinant in the realities of contemporary cultural production. The flow and the destiny of these cultural inventions is determined by the vectors inherent to the media, and these vectors can be understood through a taxonomy that looks closely at the elements that enable or constrain autonomy.

The Sword and the Shield

In an outer sphere (relative to 4Chan) we find the next significant cooperating community node of cultural production. It is called Reddit.com, a name that blends reading with editing. It is a site whose front page constantly features a blend of humour, news, and everyday life. This is because all the content found in the site is submitted by the community (also called the redditors) who gathers it from around the web, as well as from their real lives. If we understand such an operation as having a journalistic quality (whether for good of evil), the significance of 'edit' becomes meaningful. In this sense Reddit proposes a redefinition of journalism and its consumption, based on communitarian editing and news selection, and extensive debate. Reddit has seen impressive growth in the past year and is now near the mainstream media in terms of internet traffic. More importantly perhaps, is the graph where time spent on the site is compared, which accounts for a significantly superior, and growing, level of engagement and debate.



The interface drives interaction stemming from every post towards verbal rather than visual play. A moderation system consisting on 'upvotes' and 'downvotes' (which already alludes to a discourse of democracy) is the main regulatory mechanism. An overall ethos of goodwill transpires. Reddit frequently supports social causes through fundraising or coordinating action⁸.

Some of the more digestible 4Chan content is frequently posted due to its humorous nature, as well as Reddit references are sometimes found in 4Chan. Understanding the relationship between this two sites is key to understand the inner workings of the contemporary field of cultural production, in the sense that it provides an insight to the flow of texts across diverse media outlets. Blogger Henry Kieralowsky posted the following in that regard:

"It's interesting to note how the community at the news forum Reddit might be considered 4chan's mature older brother. One user, commenting on my story about the family in Detroit, called 4chan the sword to Reddit's shield. Another said:

"4chan and reddit might make a nice couple in the grand scheme of things. reddit does the do-goodery... 4 chan does what most redditors would like to do but don't.

Another wrote:

"Reddit is Social Security and 4chan is the Department of Justice. Keanu is president."⁹

(Kieralowsky 2010)

⁸ Typical self promotion ad for Reddit.com: "Instead of an ad, here's a bunny. Just our way of saying thanks"



Just our way of saying thanks.
[reddit this ad](#)

⁹ <http://kieralowski.com/4chans-curious-moral-code-urlesque>

The 'mature older brother' might lack on ingenuity but is more articulate and cleans up the mess. Paradoxically, Reddit both serves as a megaphone for 4Chan's counter-discourse and as its castrator. Reddit is alive and inventive too but the nastiness is gone; for some its actually the best of both worlds.

Significantly, Reddit is owned by global magazine publishing company Condé Nast, owner of brands like Vogue, GQ, Architectural Digest, House & Garden, Vanity Fair, The New Yorker and Wired. Condé Nast is therefore regarded to be "one of the most powerful purveyors of popular culture"¹⁰. As meaning flows flow toward the mainstream through diverse curatorial platforms, the abnormal is filtrated, sanitised, and relegated to the appropriate realms, which are ultimately defined in function to the semiotic needs of the corporate world.

4Chan's owner says when interviewed that he doesn't even receive a pay check, and that therefore his only employee (an engineer he met while playing online Tetris) makes more money than him. The site isn't even able to accept donations from the community because, due to the fringe nature of the content, virtual cash companies like PayPal refuse to process their payments. The labour that takes place in the 4Chan realm is, however, capitalized by the corporate world in a typical example of what Tiziana Terranova would call *free labour* (Terranova 2003). This processes of appropriation of commons by corporate media within digital environments is why Mateo Pasquinelli advocates for a *copyfarleft* license that discriminates the individual from the corporation when granting free use rights to digital forms of cultural production (Pasquinelli 2008).

In addition to the concerns raised by the political economy analysis, perhaps the more meaningful notion here is the plasticity of the semiotic ethos of cyberspace and how its inhabitants adopt the shape of these spaces while at the same time exploring its boundaries. If content creation practices are substantially different from 4Chan to Reddit, it is not as one tends to imagine because the individuals are different but because the interface and the overall environment are different, and impose a determined set of values on its members. Individuals accordingly adjust their digital selves.

¹⁰ http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_g1epc/is_tov/ai_2419100281/

The Environments of Evolution

The meme signals the death of the author; to participate in a meme is to lease oneself as a vehicle for the flow of an idea without expectations of retribution, whether in the form of economic or social capital. The meme is the quintessential practice of the collaborating community. The term was proposed by Richard Dawkins in 1976, long before the first internet memes:

"The new soup is the soup of human culture. We need a name for the new replicator, a noun that conveys the idea of a unit of cultural transmission, or a unit of imitation. 'Mimeme' comes from a suitable Greek root, but I want a monosyllable that sounds a bit like 'gene'. I hope my classicist friends will forgive me if I abbreviate mimeme to meme.(2) If it is any consolation, it could alternatively be thought of as being related to 'memory', or to the French word môme. It should be pronounced to rhyme with 'cream'.

Examples of memes are tunes, ideas, catch-phrases, clothes fashions, ways of making pots or of building arches. Just as genes propagate themselves in the gene pool by leaping from body to body via sperms or eggs, so memes propagate themselves in the meme pool by leaping from brain to brain via a process which, in the broad sense, can be called imitation" (Dawkins 1989)

While the biological analogy is dangerous territory, the idea of genetics can be useful to understand the relationship between cultural production and contemporary cyberspace. If the objective of evolution is survivability, then it is natural that the meme's evolution is ultimately shaped by its environment: members of the community will invariably try to propose infectious iterations, or at least what they think will be. These ideas are created to thrive and reproduce in the rules (social, technical, legal) that define each environment. Therefore 4Chan produces things that are very different from a brainstorming session at an advertising agency, for example. The thinking human wants his idea to survive; or, better, the ideas that survive are the ones that are better equipped for a particular environment. All the aspects, whether evident or not, that constitute an online collective collaboration (like website origin, ownership, interface, aesthetic, demographics, moderation, business model, hardware, etc.) play an equally significant role in determining the memes that will inhabit its space as well as the turbulences through which the will evolve.

Hyperspace Jumps

The emanations from the depths of web based collaborating communities don't stop, however, at the digital boundary. In September 2010 a Reddit user had a dream. The post title was "I've had a vision and I can't shake it: Colbert needs to hold a satirical rally in DC." and read:

I was woken in the middle of the night by this(along with the sound of my cat getting ready to pee on the rug).

Think about it. It'll be just like Colbert's mockery of GW Bush at the 2006 White House Correspondent's Dinner, but 500,000 people will be able to participate with him. We'll all stay totally in character as teabaggers. The kid with the microphone that interviews all the idiots at these things can come by and we'll ramble into his microphone.

*This would be the high water mark of American satire. Half a million people pretending to suspend all rational thought in unison. Perfect harmony. It'll feel like San Francisco in the late 60s, only we won't be able to get any acid. (...)*¹¹

It refers to Stephen Colbert, host of a highly praised TV show dedicated to political satire, especially cherished by the Reddit community. The idea (a meme) was fertilized by the community, and after over five thousand comments, petitions and phone calls started to be sent to the producers of the show. The idea of the Rally materialized on October 30, drawing a crowd of over 215.000 and generating over 5000 news articles from all kinds of journalistic organizations¹².

This episode illuminates the situation of entanglement of the different media realms in contemporary cultural production. The notion of an entangled media, where the autonomous and the corporate, the fringe and the mainstream, the centralized and the distributed seem engaged in a shapeless mesh of cultural production, ceases to be contradictory by understanding the simple reality that they are all the cultural objects of the same individuals. Media channels multiply faster than demographic segments and interest orientations. The most likely scenario is that the 4Chan user is also part of Reddit, watches the Colbert Report, attends the rally, and finally reads the news report of the event in The New York Times all while plastically adjusting his very cultural identity according to the context. Existing in a multidimensional media nexus, he does a sort of Hyperspatial jump to a parallel existence as he chooses to participate in different communities, and, for example, as he jumps from 4Chan to the streets of Washington, abruptly he is no longer the embodiment of the Anonymous ethos that states things

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¹² http://www.reddit.com/r/politics/comments/d7ntl/ive_had_a_vision_and_i_cant_shake_it_colbert/
Source: Google News

like "*We are every dark impulse you have; unrestrained and fully realized*", but an activist of *sanity*.

The Loop

Needless to say, The Colbert Report is as corporate a space as one can find, produced by Comedy Central, which is owned by Viacom Inc., the fourth largest media conglomerate in the world. Our autonomous cultural collaborative communitarian irrevocably ends as subject of the corporation, whether it is Conde Nast, Viacom, News Corporation or Google. His idea was eventually distorted into the 'Rally to Restore Sanity', the opposite of the originally suggested suspension of rationality. The 'sanity' that was meant to be 'restored' was more a foucaultian normalization of the productive consumer, brilliantly sold through debordian tactic of the spectacle. After the rally, in a moment of candour, Jon Stewart revealed what we could call the ultimate loop of capitalism:

*"Our currency is not this town's currency," was Stewart's response. "We're not running for anything. We don't have a constituency. We do television shows for people who like them and we just hope that people continue to like them so Comedy Central can continue to sell beer to young people. We're on the metric system. I understand you guys have – it's all about who's winning and who's losing and the strategy of this and the players in that. But we have TV shows and we wanted to do a really good show for people who took the time to come out and see us, and I feel like we accomplished it"*¹³

Cubitt knows the drill: *"Of course, this is also a closed loop: from an audience point of view, broadcasters deliver programming, while from the point of view of governments and advertisers, they deliver audiences, simple feedback devises"* (Cubitt 1998, p. 145). Can there be an escape from this loop, *"the modern spectacle (...): the autocratic reign of the market economy"* (Debord, 1988), where politics are the spectacular commodity of journalism, cultural production is subordinated to the corporation, and exercises of autonomy are recycled, disinfected, and thrown back for a price to a community composed of individuals with multiple personality disorder, capable of shifting ideologies as fast as our broadband connected browsers shift urls?

¹³ <http://www.fancast.com/blogs/2010/tv-news/jon-stewart-and-stephen-colbert-give-their-rally-roundup/>

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