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ON CRITICAL "TECHNOPOLITICAL PEDAGOGIES"
Learning and Knowledge Sharing with *Public Library/Memory of the World* and *syllabus ∤ Pirate Care*

Abstract

This article explores the pedagogical and political dimensions of the projects *Public Library/Memory of the World* and *syllabus ∤ Pirate Care*. *Public Library/Memory of the World* (2012–ongoing) by Marcell Mars and Tomislav Medak serves as an online shadow library in response to the ongoing commodification of academic research and threats to public libraries. *syllabus∤ Pirate Care* (2019), a project initiated by Valeria Graziano, Mars, and Medak, offers learning resources that address the crisis of care and its criminalisation under neoliberal policies. The article argues that by employing "technopolitical pedagogies" and advocating the sharing of knowledge, these projects enable forms of practical orientation in a complex world of political friction. They use network technologies and open-source tools to provide access to information and support civil disobedience against restrictive intellectual property laws. Unlike other scalable "pirate" infrastructures, these projects embrace a nonscalable model that prioritises relational, context-specific engagements and provides tools for the creation of similar infrastructures. Both projects represent critical pedagogical interventions, hacking the monodimensional tendencies of educational systems and library catalogues, and produce commoner positions.

What Is the Purpose of Pedagogy? Or How to Compose Content

> Every human lives in a world. Worlds are composed of contents, the identification of those contents, and by the configuration of content relations within – semantically, operationally and axiologically. [...] The identification of the contents of a world and its relational configuration is what establishes frames of reference for practical orientation. (Reed 1)

This quote, taken from the opening words of Patricia Reed's essay "The End of a World and Its Pedagogies" offers a good entry point for what will be discussed below in relation to the two projects *Public Library/Memory of the World* and *syllabus ʒ Pirate Care*. *Public Library/Memory of the World* is an online shadow library initiated in 2012 by Marcell Mars and Tomislav Medak in a situation where knowledge and academic research was, and still is, largely commodified and followed the logics of property law, when public libraries were threatened by austerity measures and existing shadow libraries were increasingly threatened by lawsuits (Mars and Medak 48). As a continuation of *Memory of the World*, and as a response to a period of neoliberal politics in which care is "increasingly defunded, discouraged and criminalised," *syllabus ʒ Pirate Care* was initiated in 2019 by Valeria Graziano, Mars and Medak (*syllabus ʒ Pirate Care* 2). It is an online syllabus that provides information on initiatives that counter the criminalisation of care in a neoliberal system. The following text will discuss the two projects and argue that they produce and distribute content that can be linked back to their specific form of "technopolitical pedagogy" and commoning of knowledge, thus producing a specific practical and political orientation in the world (*syllabus ʒ Pirate Care* 7). Practical orientation, with reference to Reed, is understood as a method of situating oneself within a complex and shifting reality and paying particular attention to the vectors and structures of specific relations and their activations. Practical orientation requires an active position in the development of new frameworks. If we understand content and information retrieval as a political project in itself (Kolb and Weinmayr 1), then what content we are able to access and how we are able to access is matters in relation to how worlds are composed.

These two projects were specifically chosen because they differ from similar "pirate" infrastructures such as sci-hub or library genesis in that they operate differently and are relatively small in scale. In her text "On Nonscalability", Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing argues for the development of a "theory of nonscalability", which she defines as the negative of scalability (Lowenhaupt Tsing 507). "Scalable projects"," she writes, "are those that can expand without changing" (Lowenhaupt Tsing 507). While she refers to relationships as "potential vectors of transformation" (Lowenhaupt Tsing 507), the content of both *Public Library/Memory of the World* and *Syllabus ʒ Pirate Care* is presented with a strong reference to the librarians, authors, activists, and initiatives

assembled, thus potentially allowing for a relationship with the non-interchangeable people behind the projects or book collections. Both projects provide not only the content, but also the tools to recreate such infrastructures/forms in different contexts and are therefore non static. The two projects differ from similar pirate structures in that they are not scalable in their current form and provide toolkits for recreating similar infrastructures. They are not a project of "uniform expansion", but capable of forming relations of care rather than modes of alienation (Lowenhaupt Tsing 507).

In the essay quoted above, Reed discusses the concept of worlds (actual worlds or models) as frameworks of inhabitation, shaped by content-related relations that create practical orientations. She argues that the current globalised world is characterised by monodimensional tendencies, leading to a "making-small of worlds" and a reduction of content and diversity (a similar argument to that of Lowenhaupt Tsing regarding the modern project of scalability in the sense of growth and expansion). This tendency to make "small worlds" is a familiar metaphor for describing the topologies of network technologies (Watts). One guiding question of this essay is how projects such as *Public Library/Memory of the World* and *syllabus ∤ Pirate Care* can counteract this making-small of worlds. Reed explores how worlds endure through their ability to absorb friction but come to an end when they fail to do so. She points to a disparity created by what she calls the "insuppressible friction" of "Euromodern" and "globalising practices" with "the planetary" and suggests that at the end of a world, when frictions are no longer absorbed, pedagogies must attune by adapting to existing configurations and imagining other worlds (Reed 3). Although Reed focuses on the "insuppressible friction" around the disparity of the Euromodern and the planetary, I intend to apply her argument that pedagogies must attune to learn to absorb the disparity created by frictions otherwise – namely to a state where the disparity for a political desire for a monodimensional world order, a pluriversal world order, or one that understands the world as complex "dynamic cultural fabric" becomes irrepressible (Rivera Cusicanqui 107). What is the purpose of any pedagogy if not to absorb these very political frictions?

Then, what is the purpose of pedagogy, of a school, of a university? Gary Hall, critical theorist and media philosopher, answers this question as follows:

> One of the purposes of a university is to create a space where society's common sense ideas can be examined and interrogated, and to act as a testing ground for the development of new knowledges, new subjectivities, new practices and new social relations of the kind we are going to need in the future, but which are often hard – although not impossible – to explore elsewhere. (Hall 169)

This essay is written at a time when pro-Palestinian protests on US campuses are spreading to European and Middle Eastern universities. According to the Crowd

Counting Consortium, more than 150 pro-Palestinian demonstrations took place on US campuses between April 17 and 30, 2024. The same *Washington Post* article that reported these figures affirmed that state, local, and campus police, often in riot gear, monitored or dispersed crowds on more than eighty campuses (Rosenzweig-Ziff et al.). While their presence was often requested by university administrations themselves, by the early morning of May 17, 2024, more than 2,900 people had been arrested at campus protests in the US (Halina et al.). It is in this climate at universities, Hall's statement quoted above about the university as a space for testing new social relations and new subjectivities needs to be critically reconsidered, as well as the university, its libraries, and archives as citadels of knowledge. Another level on which this text argues in favor of learning from and with projects such as *Public Library/Memory of the World* and *syllabus ≀ Pirate Care* and its everyday and critical pedagogies , is the growing discussion about the decolonisation of libraries in the Global North; about how knowledge has been catalogued, collected, and stored in these library catalogues; about what socially and historically generated orders and hierarchies underlie them, and what content has been left out by which authors (Kolb and Weinmayr 1).

If knowledge – including academic research, books, and papers being produced by scholars and researchers – is to circulate in a multitude of ways, then ways of sharing this knowledge and spaces for learning should be supported, enhanced, and presented alongside an institutional setting. Learning and producing knowledge from within institutions should not exclude learning from and sharing with the periphery. Any form of knowledge can never be entirely public or private but must involve a variety of "modes of authorship, ownership and reproduction", as Hall writes (161). These distributed modes of authorship, ownership, and reproduction protect a society from knowledge being censored or even destroyed – and so worlds, histories, and biographies can continue to flourish and be discussed from different perspectives. In addition to state educational institutions such as universities, libraries, and state archives, other pillars within societies are needed to preserve and disseminate knowledge.

In the book *School: A Recent History of Self-Organized Art Education*, Sam Thorne has collected conversations that feature projects that enable alternative pedagogical practices or "radical education" outside of large state institutions, such as the Silent University in Boston; the School for Engaged Art in St. Petersburg/Berlin, associated with the collective and magazine *Chto Delat*; or the Public School founded by Sean Dockray and Fiona Whitton, associated with the platform AAAARG.org, among many others (Thorne 26). With his contribution to the field, Thorne gathers examples of "flexible, self-directed, social and free" and often "small", "non-standardized" programmes and formats for general education (Thorne 31ff). Within this trajectory of self-organised educational platforms and critical/radical pedagogies, the focus on *Public Library/Memory of the World* and *syllabus≀ Pirate Care* may offer a response to the increasingly repressive climate within public educational institutions, the critical review of existing library catalogues, and the "circuits of academic publishing" still largely controlled by these

same institutions alongside a profitable academic publishing industry (Mars and Medak 60). Unlike most of the examples in *School*, the two examples I want to discuss are defined by the fact that they are not site-specific, but make use of network technologies and infrastructures, and therefore offer a reassessment of the question of how to use the possibilities of knowledge circulation offered by technological networks, thinking alongside questions of authorship, ownership, and reproduction, as well as the maintenance and care of knowledge.

Both projects will be discussed as examples of "techno-cultural formulations" (Goriunova 44) that embed critical pedagogies and not only address the current regulations of the circulation of knowledge and the criminalisation of care and solidarity that coinsides with it, but also offer tools and strategies to oppose these mechanisms individually and collectively. Goriunova's notion of "techno-cultural formations" refers to the ways in which technology and cultural practices co-evolve and shape one another and how these interactions produce new forms of culture and social organization, not falling into the narrative of techno-determinism. While "techno-cultural formations" play a crucial role in how knowledge is being navigated or retrieved, this essay argues, that it is all the more important to pay attention to critical pedagogies within techno-cultural formations as well as the content-form relation of certain formations. In order to better understand how techno-cultural formations shape social organisation differently from techno-determinism, the next part will make a small excursion to describe how distributed network technologies have been used in the last two decades to further confuse practical orientation, before returning to the actual projects.

From the Citadel to Calibre: Becoming an Autonomous Amateur Librarian

The push to disorient and capitalise on the "hyper-emotionalism of post-truth politics" (Hall 172), together with the rise of the digital platform economy, where companies such as Google or Amazon connect users and producers and extract value from the data generated by their interactions, transforming labour and further concentrating capital and power (Srnicek), has become increasingly influential in the politics of the last two decades. These developments have further confused the practical orientation and identification of information and content, and created political frictions. What became known as the Cambridge Analytica data scandal revealed to a wider public that the populist authoritarian right was exploiting the possibilities of network and communication technologies for its own ends. What Alexander Galloway observed in his 2010 essay "Networks" became clear:

> Distributed networks have become hegemonic only recently, and because of this it is relatively easy to lapse back into the thinking of a time when networks were disruptive of power centers, when the guerilla threatened the army, when the nomadic horde threatened the

> citadel. But this is no longer the case. The distributed network is the new citadel, the new army, the new power. (Galloway 290)

In the same essay, Galloway points out the inherent contradictions within networked systems – how they simultaneously enable open access and impose new forms of regulation, thus he called for a "critical theory" when applying the network form (Galloway 290). Although, in 2010, Galloway was still very much focusing on distributed networks as the new citadel, when in fact it was the scale-free networks that a few years later made it possible for the Facebook–Cambridge Analytica data scandal to fully unfold at the scale it did. In her award-winning article, investigative journalist Carole Cadwalladr reveals the mechanisms and scale by which data analytics firm Cambridge Analytica harvested data from individual Facebook users to supply to political campaigns, including Donald Trump's 2015 presidential campaign and the Brexit campaign. Cadwalladr compares the massive scandal to a "massive land grab for power by billionaires via our data". She wrote: "Whoever owns this data owns the future".

In their text "System of a Takedown" on circuits of academic publishing, Mars and Medak remind us that the modern condition of land grabbing and that of intellectual property, and thus copyright for digital and discrete data, have the same historical roots in European absolutism and early capitalism in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Intellectual labour in the age of mechanical reproduction, they say, has been given an unfortunate metaphor: "A metaphor modeled on the scarce and exclusive character of property over land." (Mars and Medak 49) Mars and Medak refer to a complex interplay between capital flows, property rights, and the circuits of academic publishing. In their text, they essentially criticise what they call the "oligopoly" of academic publishing. Mars and Medak state that in 2019, academic publishing was a $10 billion industry, 75 percent of which was funded by university library subscriptions. They go on to show that the major commercial publishers in the field make huge profit margins, regularly over 30 percent in the case of Reed Elsevier, and not much less in the case of Taylor and Francis, Springer, Wiley-Blackwell, and others. Mars and Medak argue that publishers maintain control over academic output through copyright and reputation mechanisms, preventing alternatives such as open access from emerging. They suggest that this control perpetuates inequality and limits access to knowledge (Mars and Medak 49). Mars and Medak follow a trajectory in their critique of the regulation of the circulation of knowledge. In his 2008 "Guerrilla Open Access Manifesto", programmer and activist Aaron Swartz criticised the academic publishing system and advocated civil disobedience to oppose these mechanisms:

> The world's entire scientific and cultural heritage, published over centuries in books and journals, is increasingly being digitized and locked up by a handful of private corporations. […] It's outrageous and unacceptable. […] We need to take information, wherever it is stored, make our copies and share them with the world. We need to take stuff that's out of copyright and add it to the archive. We need to

> buy secret databases and put them on the Web. We need to download scientific journals and upload them to file sharing networks." (Swartz 2008)

A few years prior to the publication of the "Guerilla Open Access Manifesto", the "Berlin Declaration on Open Access to Knowledge in the Sciences and Humanities" was presented. The declaration points out that the internet offers an opportunity to create a global and interactive repository of scientific knowledge and cultural heritage, which could be distributed through the means of networking. The declaration calls on policymakers, research institutions, funding agencies, libraries, archives, and museums to consider its call to action and to implement open-access policies. More than twenty years later, access to this particular system that legally circulates academic knowledge remains accessible only to a few privileged students, professors, and university staff. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights' call for equal access to education is in no way supported by a system in which knowledge is still treated as a scarcity rather than a common good. Under these continuing conditions, Mars and Medak argue that courts, constrained by viewing intellectual property through a copyright lens, have failed to reconcile the conflict between access to knowledge and fair compensation for intellectual labour. Instead, they have overwhelmingly supported the commercial interests of major copyright industries, further deepening social tensions through the commodification of knowledge in the age of digital reproduction (Mars and Medak 2019). For this reason, Mars and Medak suggest that copyright infringement (in relation to academic publishing circuits) is not a matter of illegality, but of "legitimate action" (Mars and Medak 55). They argue that a critical mass of infringement is necessary for such acts to be seen as legitimate expressions of civil disobedience. The author of *Piracy: The Intellectual Property Wars from Gutenberg to Gates*, Adrian Johns, writes that

> "information has become a key commodity in the globalized economy and that piracy today goes beyond the theft of intellectual property to affect core aspects of modern culture, science, technology, authorship, policing, politics, and the very foundations of economic and social order. [...] That is why the topic of piracy causes the anxiety that it so evidently does. [...] The pirates, in all too many cases, are not alienated proles. Nor do they represent some comfortingly distinct outside. They are us. (Johns 26)

On his personal blog, Mars explains how to become an autonomous online librarian by sharing books using network technologies to contribute to critical mass. Calibre, an open-source software, allows you to create an individual database for a book/PDF collection (Mars). Calibre semiautomatically collects metadata from online sources. Each individual collection can be shared in a few simple steps when connected to a LAN (local area network). The entire collection can also be made available to others over the internet (outside the LAN). This is a bit more complex, but easy to learn and use. These mechanisms — a database and some basic

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knowledge of how to use networking technologies – form the basis of contributing to systems like the *Public Library/Memory of the World*. Database software like Calibre, networking technologies and tutorials like Mars's, as well as the maintenance of the website itself, make it possible to become an autonomous amateur librarian: knowledge can be made freely available by the many for the many. A project like *Public Library/Memory of the World* creates a potential for decentralisation, bringing together materials and perspectives that are not already validated or authorised by the formalised environment of an institutional library (Kolb and Weinmayr 2), but allowing for "flexible, self-directed, social and free" and many "small", "non-standardised", and independent libraries and learning platforms, like those presented by Thorne (31). As of May 23, 2024, the library currently offers access to 158,819 books, available in PDF or EPUB format, maintained and offered by twenty-six autonomous librarians, that you could potentially contact in one way or another.

Learning with Syllabi: Becoming a "Subject Position"

While *Public Library/Memory of the World* is often referenced in discussions of the commons, open access, online piracy, and shadow libraries (Sollfrank, Stalder, and Niederberger), *syllabus ≀ Pirate Care* can be situated in the political tradition of radical writing and publishing in a new media environment (Dean et al.). Alongside this tradition, the initiators Graziano, Mars, and Medak claim that the project is in fact a continuation of the shadow library and its particular ethics and is using pedagogy as an "entry point" (syllabus ≀ Pirate Care 4). Inspired by "online syllabi generated within social justice movements" such as #FergusonSyllabus (2014), #BlkWomenSyllabus (2015), #SayHerNameSyllabus (2015), #StandingRockSyllabus (2016), or #BLMSyllabus (2015/2016) (Learning with Syllabus), *syllabus ≀ Pirate Care* serves as a transnational research project involving activists, researchers, hackers, and artists concerned with the "crisis of care" and the criminalisation of solidarity in "neoliberal politics" (*syllabus ≀ Pirate Care* 117). After an introduction to the syllabus and its content, summaries, reading lists, and resources from the introductory sessions "Situating Care", "The Crisis of Care and its Criminalisation", "Piracy and Civil Disobedience, Then and Now", as well as guidance for exercises, are provided. Each session/section is accompanied by an exhaustive list of references and resources, as well as links to access the resources. This is followed by more detailed insights into civic and artistic projects and activist practices such as "Sea Rescue as Care", "Housing Struggles", "Transhackfeminism", and "Hormones, Toxicity and Body Sovereignty", to name but a few. Regarding its specific pedagogies and "technopolitics", it explains that:

> We want the syllabus to be ready for easy preservation and come integrated with a well-maintained and catalogued collection of learning materials. To achieve this, our syllabus is built from plaintext documents that are written in a very simple and human-readable Markdown markup language, rendered into a static HTML website

> that doesn't require a resource-intensive and easily breakable database system, and which keeps its files on a git version control system that allows collaborative writing and easy forking to create new versions. Such a syllabus can be then equally hosted on an internet server and used/shared offline from a USB stick. (*syllabus ˦ Pirate Care* 5)

In addition to the static website (built with Hugo), it is possible to generate a PDF of the entire syllabus with a single click (this feature is built into the website using Paged.js). Some of the topics are linked to a specific literature repository on the shadow library *Public Library/Memory of the World*. The curriculum lives on a publishing platform, Sandpoints, developed by Mars. Sandpoints enables collaborative writing, remixing, and maintenance of a catalogue of learning resources as "concrete proposals for learning" (*syllabus ˦ Pirate Care* 4). The source code for the software is made available via GitHub, and all "original writing" within the syllabus is released "under CC0 1.0 Universal (CC0 1.0), Public Domain Dedication, No Copyright" and users are invited to use the material in any way (*syllabus ˦ Pirate Care* 6). The arrangement of this specific form of "Pirate Care" – an open curriculum linked to a shadow library, built with free software, together with the call for collective action – produces and distributes activities and content that can be linked back to the specific form of solidarity and ethics that the project is concerned with.

The specific technopolitical pedagogies of the two projects discussed do indeed apply a critical theory when using the network form, thus allowing for a practical orientation (especially when engaging with techno-cultural formulations.) They do so by exploring the specific content-form relations of research practices and their tools themselves; by advocating for the implementation of care in the network form; and by applying methodologies for commoning for enabling transversal knowledge exchange. They do so while embracing the opportunities offered by network technologies, calling for "technologically-enabled care and solidarity networks" (*syllabus ˦ Pirate Care* 2). These systems are in place to support the use of experimental web publishing tools. By distributing information outside dominant avenues, *Public Library/Memory of the World* and *syllabus˦ Pirate Care* continue to challenge the "unusable politics" (transmediale) and "unjust laws" (Swartz) that continue to produce harmful environments, offering a reassessment of the inherently violent dynamics of the realities of Publishing (with a capital P) (Dean et al.), the circulation of information as a commodity, and imperialist logics of structural discrimination. As a model for commoning knowledge in the form of a technically informed care infrastructure, the project not only enables its users to engage with the syllabus and library as a curriculum, but also to build and maintain similar infrastructures. As an alternative publishing infrastructure, these projects continue to have an impact on politics, pedagogies, and governance and can serve as models to carefully institute. In their 2022 publication "Infrastructural Interactions: Survival, Resistance and Radical Care", the Institute for Technology in the Public Interest (TITiPI) explore how big tech continues to intervene in the public realm. Therefore,

TITiPI asks: "How can we attend to these shifts collectively in order to demand public data infrastructures that can serve the greater public good?" (TITiPI 2022)

Projects such as *Public Library/Memory of the World* and *syllabus ? Pirate Care* produce what Goriunova – with reference to the conceptual persona in Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's "What is Philosophy?" – has called a "subject position", one that is "abstracted from the work and structures of shadow libraries, repositories and platforms" and that operates in the world in relation to subjectivities (Deleuze and Guattari; Goriunova 43). Goriunova's subject position is one that is radically different from what Hall recalls when he speaks of new subjectivities being formed within universities. In relation to making and using and learning with a shadow library like *Public Library/Memory of the World* or a repository like *syllabus ? Pirate Care*, Goriunova states:

> They [the subject positions] are formed as points of view, conceptual positions that create a version of the world with its own system of values, maps of orientation and horizon of possibility. A conceptual congregation of actions, values, ideas, propositions creates a subject position that renders the project possible. Therefore, on the one hand, techno-cultural gestures, actions, structures create subject positions, and on the other, the projects themselves as cuts of the world are created from a point of view, from a subject position. This is neither techno-determinism, when technology defines subjects, nor an argument for an independence of the human, but for a mutual constitution of subjects and technology through techno-cultural formulations. (Goriunova 43)

When one actively engages with network technologies, shadow libraries, repositories, and independent learning platforms, a subject position is constantly abstracted and made manifest. I would add to that, when one actively engages with network technologies, shadow libraries, repositories, and independent learning platforms a "commoner position" is constantly abstracted and made manifest. Galloway uses the Greek "Furies" as a metaphor for the "operative divinity" in the anti-hermeneutic tradition of networks and calls for a "new model of reading […] that is not hermeneutic in nature but instead based on cybernetic parsing, scanning, rearranging, filtering, and interpolating" (Galloway 290). The Furies, which occur above all when human justice and the law fail somewhere, are suddenly reminiscent of the figure of the pirate that disobeys "unjust legal" and "social rules" (Graziano, Mars 141). The question remains: How can pedagogy attune so that it can create commoner positions that are willing to take on the work of the furies and the pirates, the work of parsing, scanning, rearranging, filtering, and interpolating? Who owns and shares the content that composes our dialogues and worlds?

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Biography

Denise Helene Sumi (she/her) is a curator, editor, and researcher. She works as a doctoral researcher at the Peter Weibel Institute for Digital Cultures at the University of Applied Arts in Vienna and has been the coordinator of the Digital Solitude program at the international and interdisciplinary artist residency Akademie Schloss Solitude, Stuttgart, from 2019 to 2024. Her research focuses on the mediation of artistic experimental directions that establish and maintain technology-based relationships, lateral knowledge exchange, and collective approaches. Sumi was editor in chief of the *Solitude Journal* and is cofounder of the exhibition space Kevin Space, Vienna. Her writing and interviews have been published in *springerin*, *Camera Austria*, *Spike Art Quarterly*, *Solitude Journal*, *Solitude Blog*, and elsewhere.