Social in the Media

"Imagine all the software is made by people who love you"[1]

Within the past six and a half years, Varia has experimented with the work of instituting a cultural organisation outside the confines of Big Tech technologies. What kind of cultural work is made possible when your organisation's digital infrastructure is using free and open source software built by peers, digital services hosted by friends, and digital resources shared by activist organisations? What possibilities materialise when the tools one uses can be shaped in accordance with cultural workers' habits and needs? Which conditions can be collectively defined, and which ones do we have to operate within?

While there are no obvious or definitive answers to these questions, they set a ground for experimentation, where the tools used for mobilising a space are part of the cultural work itself. This zine shares some of the approaches Varia has developed, in collaboration with peers and friends, that hopefully expand the imagination of what cultural life and work might be shaped by.

The title of this zine comes from a reflection after an exchange between Varia and ODD that took place in 2019[2]. Though many things have since changed, from the commercial digital landscape, to the digital infrastructure used by Varia, we carry plenty of the observations about the social in the media into the present. A sentence that still resonates is that "a cultural organization doesn't necessarily need to do everything by themselves, but can make use of what is already available."

There are a lot of other individuals, groups, and organisations busy with these same questions.[3456] Building a mutually supportive network between them and others is a model we can imagine being resilient enough to sustain an infrastructural approach that divests from Big Tech's encroachment of public life.

What is the Social in the Media

The script that follows was developed by Manetta Berends and Cristina Cochior during an exchange with NEoN and TITiPI[7] in 2022 and updated by current members of Varia in 2024. We invite you to use this script with your organisation to develop your own approaches of what it might mean for your group to imagine forms of communication with the people crossing your digital and physical threshold that are less dependent on extractive technologies.

What would be the tasks of the "social in the media (network) facilitator"?

Starting from struggles in Varia and other small cultural spaces who wish to disentangle from Big Tech, around the question of promoting and communicating what we do and forming relations with a public/networks of networks/communities of practices.

Acknowledging the differences in communities of practices (feminist hack meetings, read & repair, digital libraries, F/LOSS, tool making, media archeology, extratonal music) and the different formats of public events (events such as concert/screening, collective learning moments, support structures for research).

To give an impression of these moments, we present a few publications that resulted from them:

∗ AMRO Times ∗

https://vvvvvvaria.org/amro-times/
https://radical-openness.org/en/programm/2022/amro-times
This printed bulletin is the result of a collaboration between Habitat and Varia during the Art Meets Radical Openness (AMRO) festival. The content was gathered through a shared effort, from which two publishing formats were rendered: a printed bulletin (AMRO Times) and an online radio platform (AMRO Tribes).

✳ Nourishing Networks ✳

https://a-nourishing-network.radical-openness.org/pages
/documentation.html
A Nourishing Network is a publishing project that aims at documenting and
circulating current research done by a network of artists, activists and
programmers that collaborate with the Austrian net culture initiative
servus.at. Especially in this moment of reduced mobility and physical
encounters, the publication stimulates the circulation of materials and their
further development in a community that usually gathers in small-sized
events and festivals.

✳ PLU Zine Homebrew Server Club special issue on XMPP ✳

https://ilu.servus.at/category/09-special-issue-xmpp.html
The Pervasive Labour Union zine is a project initiated by Lídia Pereira in
2015. The zine not only offers a low-barrier entry level for contributors
wishing to express their views on corporate social networking labour, but
also a low-barrier entry level for those wishing to become acquainted with
these debates. It tries to gather existing knowledge and conversations, while
opening up that debate and creating new discourses of user organisation
and expression.

✳ Digital Solidarity Networks ✳

https://vvvvvvvaria.org/~ccl/files/Digital%20Solidarity%20Networks.pdf
Digital Solidarity Networks is an online shared listing of tools, practices and
readings for digital solidarity, conviviality and togetherness started in March
2020 during the first lockdown in the Netherlands that was collaboratively
edited by many people. It is a resource for individuals, groups and
organisations that want to break out of the suffocating webs of Big Tech in
their everyday life and cultural work. From this listing, Varia organised three
events in which they invited Dušan Barok, LURK and The Institute for
Technology in the Public Interest to share their work, and then prepared an
afternoon exercise that relates to it. The publication contains the
documentation of these three events.

✳ Reclaiming Digital Infrastructures ✳

https://constantvzw.org/documents
/RDI/Reclaiming%20Digital%20Infrastructures.pdf
Reclaiming Digital Infrastructures is a research collaboration with KASK School of Arts in Gent, taking serious the question how to understand digital networks and communication tools as an integral part of art education. Reclaiming digital infrastructures starts from a F/LOSS perspective (Free Libre Open Source Software). Participants got acquainted with various F/LOSS software and/or methods. The publication contains the documentation of four of these moments.

✳ Vernaculars Come to Matter ✳

https://varia.zone/etp/
In Vernaculars Come to Matter, the vernacular appears in the counterdictionaries and formatterings of language; as a plurivocal remix bringing together recycled skills, diskarte practices, and humble templates; at eye level in the reverse diasporic circulation of Dutch-Turkish street typography; as an ongoing struggle with bureaucratic rigidity while transitioning gender or name; as a way to navigate the Leftove.rs archive of MayDay Rooms, where the ephemera of radical, anti-oppressive, and working class movements requires a very particular attention; or in the attitudes of photo editing software, such as ImageMagick, manifested as software culture.

Varia's Infrastructure

We would like to go through some of Varia's ever changing infrastructure. Being part of Varia, for better or worse, means interacting with the tools we, our friends, or our peers, build or install. Below you can find a diagram/map of Varia's infrastructure and an appendix to go with it:

⚛ Varia website ⚛

https://varia.zone/
One of the core interests of Varia is to relate to technology in a material as well as a discursive way, by installing or making it ourselves. We host multiple services on the Varia server, including the Varia website which we collectively maintain. The Varia website is made with Pelican, a static site generator written in Python. This means that the website is first generated on a computer (using Python, Jinja and Pelican) into a set of html pages, files and images. This set of documents is then uploaded to the server.

⚛ Narrowcast ⚛

https://stream.vvvvvvaria.org/
Narrowcast is a streaming space broadcasting events that are happening in Varia. The station functions either as an orbiting broadcasting channel for the physical public events in our space, or as a mirror to other livestreams, or as audio-only events. The broadcasting programme is a way to further engage with alternative modes of broadcasting events and inviting audiences to participate from a distance.

⚛ Etherpad ⚛

https://pad.vvvvvvaria.org/
Etherpad is a highly customizable open source online editor providing collaborative editing in really real-time. Varia members use it to collect thoughts, write messages together and keep each other informed.

⚶ Git ⚶

https://git.vvvvvvaria.org/
Git is a distributed version control system that tracks changes in any set of computer files, usually used for coordinating work among programmers who are collaboratively developing source code during software development. As part of our practices, Varia members write situated software that are made public on our gitea instance.

⚶ Archive ⚶

https://vvvvvvaria.org/archive/
Varia's archive is generated through Distribusi, a content management system for the web that produces static pages based on the file system. With the archive we share and save our past activities through text and image.

⚶ Octomode ⚶

https://git.vvvvvvaria.org/CC/octomode
Octomode is a collective editing space for PDF making, using Etherpad, Paged.js and Flask. Inspired by the multi-centered, tentacular cognition capabilities of the octopus, it imagines a space in which the artificial boundaries of writing and design can be crossed; where writing, editing and designing can be done in one environment simultaneously, allowing the format to influence the matter and vice-versa. For instance, this publication is made through Octomode.

⚶ XMPP (public group chats) ⚶

https://chat.vvvvvvaria.org/
Extensible Messaging and Presence Protocol (XMPP) is an open XML technology for real-time communication, which powers a wide range of applications including instant messaging, presence and collaboration. Varia uses xmpp to offer publicly accessible group chats, to gather files for research, and also sometimes to speak to each other.

⚜ Logbot logs ⚜

https://vvvvvvaria.org/logs/
Logbot is a small XMPP (see XMPP explanation above) bot written in Python (using the slixmpp library) that logs all images and messages with the mentioning of @bot within a group chat to an HTML page, to allow collaborative log writing over time.

⚜ LURK ⚜

https://lurk.org/
LURK is a volunteer run platform that hosts, facilitates and archives discussions around net- and computational culture and politics, proto- and post-free culture practices, (experimental) (sound) (new media) (software) art, and things like that. LURK provides a few community services composed of mailing lists, chat and access to the Fediverse. Varia uses LURK's infrastructure for maintaining its mailing list.

⚜ Nextcloud ⚜

To store digital documents and maintain an archive, Varia uses Nextcloud, which is a suite of different self-hosted software that can be used synchronously. One of Nextcloud functions is its cloud storage which gives us the option to upload and share files that are accessible to one another.

⚜ Calendar ⚜

Varia self-hosts our own calendars so that we can coordinate our use of the space, hosting events and having meetings. The calendar is hosted on the Varia server, and allows anyone with an account to add, change or delete events from a calendar client of choice.

⚜ Internal wiki ⚜

In order to make the inner-workings of Varia accessible to its members, Varia hosts a specific wiki page that allows any information, from everyday activities to protocols for large decisions, to be accessible to any of its members. Members can add, change or delete information from the Wiki page.

⚜ rosa ⚜

https://hub.vvvvvvaria.org/rosa/ATNOFS/ rosa is a travelling infrastructure for documentation, collective note taking, and publishing. This is also where they act as a place to learn what a feminist server is. rosa is constituted by a multiplicity of processes, soft structures and relations. They became a moving repository of reflections on the norms and rigidities that computing enacts. This sparked ways to practically counter them, for example by changing error pages to include the commands needed to restart services, or by making interventions in the language of the command line. rosa emerged from the project A Traversal Network of Feminist Servers.

Varia's Communication

Varia has several communication channels that are used to broad- and narrowcast information about events, research, opinions and experiments within the space. Below you can find a diagram/map and its appendix for our communication flows:

∴ Sometimes ∵

https://vvvvvvaria.org/sometimes/
SomeTimes is an irregularly printed collection of everyday announcements and conversation snippets that are periodically gathered from previous online posts on Mastodon (a federated social media platform), the Varia website, our email newsletter, group chats recorded by the 'logbot' (an automated friend that helps us organise and index what we share), and from websites of peers and comrades.

∴ Varia Mastodon ∵

https://gts.varia.zone/@varia
Varia hosts an instance of Mastodon that is used to broadcast about what goes on inside and outside of our space. This includes announcements about our programme and member activies.

∴ Newsletter ∵

https://we.lurk.org/mailman3/lists/varia.we.lurk.org/
https://we.lurk.org/hyperkitty/list/varia@we.lurk.org/latest
Varia sends out a monthly newsletter, which is hosted on LURK's infrastructure. Each month the future events hosted by Varia are collected and sent out to subscribers alongside an 'open tap' that features the different activities of individual Varia members.

∴ Televex ∵

https://vvvvvvaria.org/archive/2021_televex/
The Televex is a module containing a raspberry pi, a receipt printer and a screen that collects events and RSS feeds from the Varia websites and

displays them in the window of our space. The Televex is a currently inactive, but there are plans to revive it.

∴ Windows ∴

The windows at Varia function as a literal window into our activities. They are used to communicate with our neighbours or anyone passing by the space, using flyers, posters, drawings and texts.

A Social in the Media Workshop

This workshop can be repeated with your collective or organisation. Take some time to discuss the questions among yourselves. Then you may choose to follow the exercise below, which invites you to come up with another mode of communication that can be more or less realistic.

Questions

How do we reclaim communication (from the perspective of a cultural organisation) not only as an act to arrive at something or someone, but also as the journey itself?

What other, more intimate, more processual ways of communicating can there be?

What ways of establishing relations instead of promoting passive consumption can there be?

How to build networks of networks and communities of practices (which is our main mode of operating?), while not excluding accidental encounters with a broader possible audience? How do we stay aware who is part of these networks of networks and who is not?

Method

The proposal is to do 3 rounds of the following steps in pairs of 2 people:

1. Pick 3 sections from below
2. Take 5 minutes to add more items to the lists
3. Pick one item from each section
4. Copy/paste them after line 454
5. Try to combine them and imagine a means of communication
6. Give it a title
7. Start a new round

Who

who would you like to reach?
- specific communities of practice, namely: …
- your childhood friends
- people who like searching for things
- …

Relations

how would you like to relate to someone who comes to your space?
- they become speakers in your space at a later stage
- they will join you when you have a barbeque with your friends
- as peer learner
- …

Habits

which habits within the organisation would you like to have?
- hide messages under a rock and tell the other person where to find it
- once every two weeks, and based on rotation, one person sends a daydream/desire/wish/lullaby to the internal mailinglist of the organisation
- collective nap time
- …

Materials

what materials/content would you like to share?
- reading lists
- code repositories
- jokes
- …

Voices

what modes of address would you use?
- dreamy
- love letter
- understandable
- ...

Tools

what tools/infrastructure can be used for communication?
- snail mail
- a small mechanical arm that writes on sand at the beach
- a printer on top of a high building; when something is being printed, it falls down
- ...

Colophon

This publication was made using Creative Crowds'[8] Octomode[9] installation.

This zine was put together by part of Varia's Communication Workgroup (Benjamin Earl, Cristina Cochior and Niek Hilkmann).

The typeface used is the default sans-serif font on Firefox.

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1. Slogans for Counter Cloud Action. https://titipi.org/wiki/index.php/Slogans↵

2. The Social in the Media: On Digital Interdependencies (Varia Visits ODD), 2019. https://varia.zone/en/the-social-in-the-media.html↵

3. Dear student, teacher, worker in an educational institution, https://constantvzw.org/wefts/distant-elephant.en.html↵

4. CSNI Conversations https://www.centreforthestudyof.net/?page_id=5037↵

5. Counter Cloud Action Plan https://titipi.org/pub/Counter_Cloud_Action_Plan.pdf↵

6. Pedagogical diversions despite the rectangularisation of life https://constantvzw.org/wefts/relearningseries.en.html↵

7. From Cloud to Crowd: A residency in the Keiller Center https://neondigitalarts.com/projects/from-cloud-to-crowd/↵

8. Creative Crowds https://cc.vvvvvvaria.org/↵

9. Octomode code on the Varia git https://git.vvvvvvaria.org/varia/octomode↵