Conceptualizing consumption-critical media practices as political participation

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Abstract

Consumption-critical media practices are those practices which are either using media for criticising (certain) consumption or which are (consciously practiced) alternatives to the consumption of media technologies such as repairing, exchanging or producing durable media technologies. While the former can be found on the level of media content, the latter are practiced on the levels of production and appropriation. This article aims at conceptualizing the phenomenon 'consumption-critical media practices' by analysing examples on the levels of media production, appropriation and content. Moreover, consumption-critical media practices are discussed as political participation as they are aiming at shaping and changing society – often striving for sustainability.

Keywords: consumption-criticism, media practice, sustainability, political participation

1 Introduction

The financial and economic crisis happening in Europe within the last years plus climate change have provoked a growing awareness regarding the social and environmental effects of consumer society. This awareness has led to changes in the consumption practices of more and more people. Transition Towns, Urban Gardening, Exchange Circles or Repair Cafés are projects with which people criticize the capitalist consumer society, its exploitation of natural resources and people. With these projects, individuals seem to have increasingly created collective ways to develop alternatives to dominant consumption practices by aiming at sustainability.

Media play a crucial role in these projects as people mainly use Internet media such as e-mail, weblogs, online forums or online networks, like Facebook and Twitter, to network and mobilize people. Participants use "old" media such as flyers or leaflets for the purpose of public relations and try to get the attention of mass media to advertize their projects and ideas. In some of the consumption-critical projects mentioned above, media are the centre of focus themselves as participants are aware of the socio-ecological effects the production, consumption and disposal of media technologies cause, and try to develop alternatives in the production and appropriation of media devices. These alternatives are consumption-critical media practices, which are the object of this article.

Consumption-critical media practices are those practices which either use media to criticize (certain) consumption or which are (conscious) alternatives to the consumption of media technologies such as repairing or exchanging media technologies or producing durable media devices. While the former can be found on the level of media content, the latter are practiced on the levels of production and appropriation.

This article aims at conceptualizing the phenomenon of 'consumption-critical media practices' by analysing examples on the levels of media production, appropriation and content. Moreover, consumption-critical media practices are discussed as political participation as they aim to shape and change society – often striving for sustainability. Therefore first, the research fields on political participation and consumption-criticism in media and communication studies are sketched. Then examples of consumption-critical media practices are analysed on the levels of media production, appropriation and content. Concluding the article, these consumption-critical media practices are discussed as political participation, pointing to the contribution these practices want to and could make for a sustainable society but also to the constraints of these practices.

2 Political participation and consumption-criticism in media and communication studies

The term participation is used in different ways, also in media and communication studies (see Carpentier, 2011, pp. 15-38; Barrett/Brunton-Smith, 2014). Political participation in this article is defined as voluntary practices by citizens, which aim at influencing and shaping society (de Nève/Olteanau, 2013, p. 14). The term political participation has to be distinguished from the term engagement: While participation refers to processes in which citizens *actively* take part, the term engagement rather refers to moments of interest and attention (Dahlgren, 2009, pp. 80-83; Barrett/Brunton-Smith, 2014, p. 6).

In a mediatized society, participation also takes place in and through media (Altheide, 1997). In media and communication studies, the discourse on media and participation has a long tradition (see Carpentier, 2011, pp. 64-131 for an overview). While participation *in* media deals with participation in the production of media content and the decision-making processes in media organisations, participation *through* media deals with mediated participation in public debate and self-representation (Carpentier, 2011, pp. 67-68). Both kinds of participation will play a role in conceptualizing consumption-critical media practices – mainly in the section dealing with the level of media content. In the parts of this article dealing with consumption-critical production and appropriation, a third layer of political participation becomes visible, which is rarely acknowledged in media and communication studies: What do people actually do with media technologies and in what way are these practices acts of political participation? Political participation in the production and appropriation of media technologies will be discussed below, focussing on the aspect of consumption-criticism.[1]

Consumption-criticism and consumption-critical campaigns are examined in media content analysis within the field of political communication (e.g. Baringhorst, et al., 2010; Micheletti/ Stolle, 2007). In media appropriation studies, analyses examine the reasons and kinds of non-consumption or "media refusal"[2] (Portwood-Stacer, 2012, p. 1042, see e.g. case studies in First Monday special issue edited by Baumer et al. 2015). Portwood-Stacer, for example, shows that people refuse to use Facebook because they want to "register dissent against the company's specific policies or indeed against corporate media as a whole" (Portwood-Stacer, 2012, p. 1046). Here, a certain company is criticized by consumers, who refuse to participate in a certain medium.

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1 Political participation dealing with media technologies may imply more meanings of political participation than consumption-criticism, another example would be media practices dealing with aspects of data security.

2 Portwood-Stacer defines media refusal as the „practice in which people consciously choose not to engage with some media technology or platform" (Portwood-Stacer, 2012, p. 1046).

Sustainability and climate change (which are often reasons for people to avoid the consumption of media technologies, see below) are objects of media content analysis (e.g. Schäfer/Schlichting, 2014). Regarding the use of media and aspects of sustainability and climate change, studies ask for the perception of these issues by journalists and recipients of (mass) media (e.g. Brüggeman/ Engesser, 2013; Adolphsen/Lück, 2012; Berglez, 2011). But media practices, which aim at sustainability, are rarely analyzed.

A small section of media technology studies focusses on the socio-ecological effects of the increasing consumption of media technologies, examining the production (e.g. Bleischwitz et al., 2012; Maxwell/Miller, 2012; Chan/Ho, 2008) and disposal of media technologies (e.g. Kaitatzi-Whitlock, 2015, pp. 71-73). These socio-ecological effects are often reasons for consumption-critical media practices, as the following remarks will show.

2   Consumption-critical production of media technologies

A first domain in which consumption-critical media practices can be observed is the production of media technologies. Here, initiatives can be found which try to develop media technologies that have been produced under fair working conditions with sustainable resources. In the following, two examples of consumption-critical media production will be analyzed. The first example is the Fair Mouse, a computer mouse developed by the German non-governmental organisation NagerIT (English: rodentIT), which should be produced under fair working conditions with (also) sustainable resources such as bioplastic (that is made out of wood leavings produced by the paper industry, see Nager-IT 2015a). The association wants to "kick-start a fair trade electronics market so that one day caring customers have the possibility to choose the fair option for every product they need" (NagerITb). NagerIt itself is not a company but an association registered in Germany, which criticizes the big companies in the electronics industry for producing devices unfairly and for not being the initiators of better working conditions (NagerIT, 2015a). They blame companies like Apple for not being honest with their code of ethics or conduct (NagerIt, 2015b), and contrast them with their own ethics: "The goal of our project is to produce a mouse without damaging anyone who is involved in the production" (ibid.). Being a registered association and not a company, NagerIt is a political non-governmental organisation and not a profit-oriented enterprise.

The association uses its website for advertising, giving potential customers the option to order the Fair Mouse as well as pointing them to distributors (which are only 16 rather small computer shops or little shops offering fair trade products in Germany). They also make the production chain and their understanding of "fair" transparent on their website: their idea of fair relates to

restricted working hours (relying on the standards of the International Labour Organization), appropriate payment, health protection, social security, freedom of association, exclusion of exploitative child and forced labour (NagerIt, 2015b).

Similar to NagerIt and the Fair Mouse is the argumentation and self-representation of Fairphone – a smartphone and company based in Amsterdam, the Netherlands. The smartphone was developed in 2010, and 60,000 devices have been sold so far. Since December 2015 the second phone generation has been delivered (Fairphone, 2015a).

The company Fairphone aims at producing a smartphone which is manufactured under safe working conditions with fair wages and with (also) sustainable resources which are extracted in conflict-free areas (Fairphone, 2015, p. 1). It not only strives to offer a fair alternative to other smartphones but also tries to influence discourses (ibid.). The smartphone itself is personified on the website as having social values (Fairphone, 2015g). The company describes itself as a "social enterprise that is building a movement for fairer electronics" (Fairphone, 2015a). "Social" for them means that the company is not profit-oriented: They make the costs for the production of a Fairphone 2 transparent and claim that the 9 Euro profit per device is saved for unexpected costs or additional investments (Fairphone, 2015c). The company justifies using commercial strategies to maximize its social impact (Fairphone, 2015d, 1).

Fairphone 1 and 2 have been produced in a "crowdfunding" process (ibid.), meaning that both devices were only manufactured after the company had sold enough devices in advance to make sure that the production costs would be covered.

Similar to NagerIt, the Fairphone company uses its website to create transparency, advertise and allow for orders. In contrast to NagerIt, they also use Facebook (https://www.facebook.com/fairphone), Twitter (https://twitter.com/fairphone), and Instragram (https://www.instagram.com/wearefairphone/) to build a "Fairphone community". People are invited to become part of the "Fairphone movement" by either buying the device and/or becoming part of the social networks used by the company (Fairphone 2015h): "Buy a phone, join a movement", (Fairphone 2015d). The company tries to construct a community in Max Weber's sense (Weber, 1972, p. 21): people *sharing the aim* of sustainability and constructing *a feeling of belonging*: "#WeAreFairphone" (Fairphone 2015h).

The company indirectly criticizes frequent consumption of new media technologies by trying to produce a durable phone, which is designed in a modular way and therefore repairable (Fairphone, 2015e, pp. 1, 3). Thereby, the company strives to change the "relationship" between people and their smartphones (ibid., p. 2), giving the consumers more control over their phone (ibid., p. 3).

The Fairphone as well as the Fair Mouse are not completely fair – as both initiatives admit on their websites: One third of the Fair Mouse should be produced under fair conditions (NagerIt, 2015c) and so far, there are only two minerals (tin and tantalum) included in the Fairphone which are actually produced under conflict-free working conditions in the Democratic Republic of Congo (Fairphone, 2015f). The Fairphone company claims that "100% fair phone is in fact unachievable" (Fairphone, 2015e, p. 2), but both initiatives stress that they follow a "step-by-step process" trying to make their products more "fair" in the future (ibid.).

While both initiatives criticize bigger companies (directly, NagerIt or in-directly, Fairphone) and try to offer alternatives with their products, they still support the consumption of media technologies – framing it as "good" con-sumption. Therefore, not the consumption itself is criticized by the initiatives but the consumption of non-fair and non-sustainable media technologies and the non-fair production itself. Still, the initiatives can be characterized as be-ing consumption-critical while the criticism mainly focuses on the production process.

3   Consumption-critical media appropriation

The consumption of media technologies itself is criticized by initiatives act-ing on the level of media appropriation. Here, people develop alternatives to buying media technologies such as smartphones, computers, tablets etc. regu-larly by e.g. repairing, exchanging or giving away their devices. The repairing of media technologies will be in the focus of the following section, as it has become more popular within the last years. While repairing itself is an old practice, it has been made visible and is politicized in Repair Cafés. Repairing can be defined as "the process of sustaining, managing, and repurposing tech-nology in order to cope with attrition and regressive change." (Turner/Rosner, 2015, p. 59) Repair Cafés are new formats of events, in which people meet to repair together their everyday objects such as electronic devices, textiles or bicycles, – media technologies being among those goods which are brought most often to these events. While some people offer help in the repairing pro-cess voluntarily and without charge, others seek help in repairing their things. The idea is not to provide a "free service centre" but to help people to help themselves.

The Dutch foundation Stichting Repair Café claims to have invented the concept of Repair Cafés in 2009 (Stichting Repair Café, without date). Wheth-er the origin or not, Repair Cafés have spread all over Western-European and North-American countries within the last years.[3]

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3   See a map for many of the locations at www.repaircafe.org.

Repairing and public sites of repair are mainly analysed in design and technology studies: Repairing is analyzed as a process of negotiated endurance, stressing that the lifecycle of things is rather negotiated by the users in the appropriation process than planned ahead by the people who designed these things (Rosner/Ames 2014, pp. 319, 329), it is analyzed as art (Jackson/Kang, 2014), and it is analyzed in developing contexts (Houston, 2012; Jackson/Pompe/Krieshok, 2012). Also the gender roles, which are (de)constructed in public sites of repair are analysed (Rosner/Ames 2014, p. 8; Rosner, 2013). The political dimension of repairing and public sites of repair is touched upon in several studies: Repairing in public sites of repair is discussed as technical empowerment (Rosner/Ames, 2014). Rosner and Turner call Repair Cafés "Theaters of alternative industry" (2015), which are "meant to demonstrate the power of creative re-manufacturing to change the world" (ibid., p. 65). The authors stress that the participants of public sites of repair strive for social change, whereupon the change here is mainly seen in questions of egalitarianism and collectivity (ibid., p. 67).

In a quantitative study Charter and Keiller analyse the motivations of people getting involved in Repair Cafés. The top three reasons why participants engage in Repair Cafés were: to encourage others to live more sustainably, to provide a valuable service to the community, and to be part of the movement to improve product reparability and longevity (2014, p. 5). The authors draw the conclusion that the volunteers act altruistically and that their personal gain is not important to them (ibid., p. 13).

In a qualitative study I analyzed Repair Cafés in Germany following the research questions: Why do people participate in Repair Cafés? What do the Repair Cafés and the practice of repairing mean to the participants, especially when repairing media technologies? And which societal relevance do the participants see in the Repair Cafés?[4] When analyzing the motivations and aims of people repairing their media technologies in Repair Cafés, five main aspects were identified: conservation of resources, waste prevention, valuation of the apparatus, having fun to repair, and economic pressure, the former three being consumption-critical (Kannengießer, forthcoming).

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4   The study was conducted in 2014 and 2015. I used the qualitative approach of Grounded Theory to pursue answers to these research questions. As a sample, I chose three Repair Cafés which differ regarding their venues and the background of the organisers: I chose one Repair Café in Oldenburg (a small city in Northern Germany), which is organised by people working for the University of Oldenburg. A second case was a Repair Café in Berlin in the suburb of Kreuzberg, which is organised by an artist in her studio. The third case is organised by an elderly woman, who organises a Repair Café in a small town near Hannover in Northern Germany in collaboration with an organisation for volunteers of the town. I conducted observation at these events carried out 30 interviews with organisers, people offering help in these events as well as participants seeking help. The data was analysed using the three-step coding process of Grounded Theory. The quotes used in this section of the article are taken from this study. A deeper analysis can be found in Kannengießer forthcoming.

People involved in Repair Cafés are aware of the harmful production processes of media technologies: "I think especially the repairing of computers is important as they contain resources, because of which people in other countries die," says one of the organisers in a Repair Café. Many organisers and participants of the Repair Cafés point to the harmful and pollutive circumstances and situations of war under which the resources needed for digital media technologies (such as coltan) are extracted.

A second dominant motivation for people to repair their devices is waste prevention: "We would have a better world if more people repair their things [...] because our planet would be less polluted," tells one participant. Several interviewees point to the conditions on waste dumps in Ghana, where people (often children) burn the broken media technologies to get out reusable resources thus damaging their health and the environment with poisonous substances that end up in the soil and groundwater.

Having the socio-ecological effects of the production and disposal of media technologies in mind, participants of Repair Cafés try to avoid the production of new media technologies and disposal of existing ones by prolonging the life-span of the ones they own.

They stress the value of their existing devices and their personal relationship to the technologies they possess: "I befriended my smartphone," tells one participant trying to repair his phone. A volunteer helping to repair media technologies underlines the amount of work which is invested in each apparatus: People inventing, developing and designing the products and others constructing them, which is a reason for him to value his goods and try to maintain them.

The repairing of media technologies can be defined as a consumption-critical media practice as the frequent consumption of media technologies is criticized, as well as the harmful and pollutive production and disposal processes of media apparatus. Active participants involved in Repair Cafés strive for a change regarding media practices in everyday life: they want to prolong the life-span of their devices to avoid buying new ones, and try to spread their consumption-critical ideas by repairing publicly and staging Repair Cafés as consumption-critical events. Repair Cafés are used as venues by the organisers and volunteers to debate consumption and consumption-criticism.

Repair Café communities (*Vergemeinschaftungen*) are formed in Max Weber's sense (see above): People meet because of a shared aim and sense a feeling of belonging. One volunteer helping to repair computers explains: "People who are participating in something of this kind [Repair Cafés] have a different societal and political attitude. [...] For me, it is much nicer to get involved in something cooperative than in business, because there is a sense

of belonging. I do not belong to Saturn,[5] I buy at Saturn, but actually I do not give a shit about Saturn." In Repair Cafés a consumption-critical community gathers.

4   Consumption-criticism in media content

On the level of media content, people and organisations use media to spread consumption-critical opinions and ideas and network with like-minded consumption-critical people. Sigrid Baringhorst analyzes transnational anti-corporate campaigns in Germany, and stresses that these campaigns are mostly run by non-governmental organisations and not individual people (Baringhorst, 2010, p. 104). She claims that Internet media provide a rich information resource for consumers but that the consumer is still dependent on civil society organisations, and their gatekeeper and watchdog-functions because of the amount of information in the WorldWideWeb and the sources lack of reliability (ibid., p. 94).

One example of an initiative using Internet media to spread information about (critical) consumption is the limited liability company Utopia. Utopia claims to be "Germany's website No.1 for sustainable consumption" (Utopia, 2015a). The company's overall aim is to bring people, organisations and companies together that "want to contribute together with us to a sustainable development in economy and society." It aims at "informing and inspiring millions of consumers to change their consumer behaviour and lifestyle into sustainable ones" (ibid.).[6] The company wants to consult people in their consumption (ibid.). To reach this goal they distribute information on their website and in their e-mail-newsletters, and they provide an online-network for "utopian people" (Utopia, 2015c, see below), who again give their opinions and tips on topics of sustainable consumption in forums and blogs on the website.

The website is structured along the categories "news", "magazine", "product guide", "community" and "product tests" (Utopia, 2015a). In these sections, products and companies which are seen as non-sustainable by Utopia, are named and criticized, and companies and products as well as practices which are judged as sustainable by the company Utopia are introduced. Also sustainable alternatives on the media technology market are advertised, e.g. the Fairphone (see above), which is discussed as a sustainable alternative on the smartphone market (Utopia, 2015b).

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5   Saturn is one of the biggest stores selling electronic goods in Germany.
6   The quotes are taken from the company's website, which exists only in German, and have been translated by the author.

Using an online-network, Utopia tries to construct a community among consumption-critical people, organisations and companies with itself at the centre. In the online-network more than 80,000 people are registered. Members create their own profiles, have their own "pin board" to write on, can write (publicly) their own blogs, can join different groups, and become friends or network with other "utopian people". The membership is free of charge. Utopia invites people to become part of Utopia on the registration site: "Here is Utopia, Germany's biggest community for sustainable life-style. Just fill in the following fields, and be part of it!" (Utopia, 2015c)

To login in to the online-network, you have to click the button "Set out for Utopia!" Utopia is the online-network which can be accessed by registering on the website. Registered members of the network are called "utopian people" by the company (ibid.). But there are no transparent criteria that characterize a "utopian person" nor has the company any access to reliable information about the registered members and their utopian ideas or practices.

The company claims to have an independent editorial staff (Utopia, 2015a), but it cooperates closely with companies in generating content. Therefore, the website becomes a platform for companies which Utopia judges as being sustainable to advertise. Utopia claims to be financed by advertising published either in banners, as advertorials (in which advertising is combined with editorial content) through product tests or promotion activities (e.g. testing fair jeans produced by a specific company). On their website, they explain their rules for advertising: those that are not allowed to advertise on the website include companies in the nuclear power sector and arms industry, enterprises producing biocide or doing genetic engineering, excluded are also companies which offend standards of the International Labour Organization, act against human rights and national as well as international climate conventions (ibid.). But how Utopia proves that companies advertising on their websites fulfil these criteria is not made transparent.

Utopia uses its website, e-mail-newsletter and online-network to influence consumer behaviour. These media are used to criticize practices of consumption or consumer goods (media technologies sometimes being these goods) and advertising as well as discussing alternatives which are classified as sustainable by the company. Utopia can be perceived as an example of consumption-critical media practices on the level of media content, whereby the consumption itself is not criticized. Rather, Utopia supports consumption by advertising for consumer goods and consumption practices, which the company classifies as sustainable.

5 Consumption-critical media practices as political participation

One aim of the article was to conceptualize consumption-critical media practices. For the level of media production, the Fairphone and Fair Mouse were described as examples of consumption-critical media products. The company Fairphone and the non-governmental organisation NagerIT produce these devices aiming at the development and distribution of fair and sustainable media technologies. Moreover, they try to influence the discourse on media technologies and sustainability. For the level of media appropriation, Repair Cafés were discussed as events in which consumption-critical media practices were performed: the repairing of media technologies can be observed as a consumption-critical media practice as people repair their media technologies to prolong the life-span of their devices and to avoid buying new apparatuses. By repairing, participants try to contribute to sustainability because they are aware of the socio-ecological effects that the production and consumption of media technologies cause. The repairing happens publicly in Repair Cafés, which are staged as public events to debate and advertise consumer-criticism and alternatives to consumption. Regarding media content, Utopia was introduced as an example of consumption-critical media practices, as the company uses its website and e-mail-newsletter to criticize consumption practices and consumer goods that it judges as non-sustainable, and advertises consumer goods and consumption practices that the company judges as sustainable. Moreover, the company offers an online-network for "utopian people", in which registered members can meet, form groups and blog about their ideas and consumption behaviour.

These examples of consumption-critical media practices have in common that they use media (technologies) to criticize consumption, discuss alternatives to dominant consumption practices and offer alternatives for the consumption of media technologies. They are *media practices*, as they are *related to media* (technologies). Stressing the relevance of a paradigm which perceives media as practice, Couldry poses the question: "What, quite simply, are people doing in relation to media across a whole range of situations and contexts?" (Couldry, 2004, p. 119) The examples discussed in this text are therefore all media practices as people act consumption-critically with in *relation to* media: either by using media to criticize (certain) consumption or by developing alternatives to the consumption of media technologies while repairing, exchanging or producing durable media technologies (see definition at the beginning of this chapter). While Couldry uses the term media practices mainly for those practices related to media content, the examples discussed in this text show that the term has to be discussed in a broader way for all practices which are related to media – also to the devices themselves.

The consumption-critical media practices discussed in this chapter all try to make a contribution to sustainability and in doing so transform society. Defining political participation as voluntary actions by citizens aiming at influencing and shaping society (de Néve/Olteanau, 2013, p. 14, see above), the consumption-critical media practices discussed can be characterized as political participation. People volutarily get involved in these practices with the aim to transform society into a sustainable one. The political participation in these consumption-critical media practices is either participation *in* and *through* media (Carpentier 2011, 67-68, see above, as the example for the level of media content shows) or participation by acting *with and on media* technologies themselves (as the examples for the levels of media production and appropriation show). The example of the website Utopia shows that here, mediated political participation takes place; registered members gain the possibility of taking part in the public debate and to represent themselves as "utopian people" in the online-network (participation *through* media). In forums and blogs members can create and shape media content (participation *in* media).

The examples of consumption-critical media production and appropriation point to a third level of political participation: People use media technologies to actively shape and transform society. By repairing media technologies and thereby prolonging the life-span of the devices as well as producing media technologies under fair and sustainable working conditions, people involved criticize dominant forms of appropriation and production, try to develop alternatives, and contribute to a sustainable society.

In the examples discussed, aspects of community-building became visible in Max Weber's sense (Weber, 1972, p. 21, see above): Initiators like the companies Fairphone and Utopia strive to build communities among people sharing consumption-critical attitudes and in Repair Cafés the feeling of belonging to an "alternative" community was perceived. There are political reasons to form communities in the examples discussed, such as to empower the participants and to emphasize consumption-critical ideas, but there may also be economic reasons: the more members the "Fairphone community" gets, the more Fairphones are sold, the more members the online-network Utopia gets, the more attractive the website becomes for commercial advertising.

This thesis is already a hint to the constraints of consumption-critical media practices: When are these practices criticizing the act of consumption and when do they advertise again for consumption? This consumption might be an "alternative" one, but it would still need resources and energy and does produce waste. Resources are also needed by the consumers: e.g. buying a Fairphone requires a certain amount of money (the current Fairphone costs 525 Euros, see Fairphone 2015i). Moreover, being fair or sustainable also has its limits: e.g. not all resources needed for digital technologies can be currently extracted under fair and sustainable working condition. Finally, the consump-

tion-critical media practices have their limits regarding their influence on society and its transformation: e.g. the public debate generated on the website Utopia is restricted to this online-platform and in Repair Cafés only a small, although growing, section of the population participates.

These critical aspects in consumption-critical media practices have to be taken into account when analysing them in more detail. Nevertheless, the analysis of consumption-critical media practices is more than relevant, not only for contributing to the research field of political participation and consumption(-criticism) in media and communication studies. But also to discuss ways in which media technologies can be produced, appropriated and used in times of financial and economic crisis, as well as climate change.

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Biography

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