

Laura Balboa
internetis.tv

internetis.tv – a speculative excursion into immateriality by Stephen Kovats

“A revolution is a struggle to the death between the future and the past.”
Fidel Castro¹

It is perhaps the information age’s most poetic irony that one of the world’s smallest countries, the island state of Tuvalu, holds the moniker for being one of the world’s most lucrative internet domains, .tv. The irony doesn’t rely exclusively on the magnitude of this inversely proportional relationship but foremost on the questions that emanate from the presumptive physical disappearance of the state as global water levels rise.²

The use and commercialisation of the .tv Top Level Domain (TLD) is the highest source of state income,³ making Tuvalu perhaps the first and only internet driven market economy. As the range and power of global broadcasters increase, linking more and more of their satellite programme to and with the internet, so the island’s economy grows more robust. A boom that is certain not to bust any time soon, but rather to dematerialise into a virtual economy whose main purpose will be the support and maintenance of its population, dispersed and scattered among its neighbours by the ocean waves that traditionally were the domain of the island’s prosperity.

Laura Balboa’s project is an aesthetic excursion into the paradoxical lives of the .tv suffix. It is a visual and physical manifestation of data entering the real world of objects, tools and signifiers ... and one which stands perhaps as a unique pre-emptive monument to a space and place that may soon only exist as an immaterial entity. Balboa picks up on the numerous dualities and ironies created by the juxtaposed scenarios of national disintegration and exponential corporate acceleration. She attempts to transfer the (democratic?) will of the people into the potential of the power the users wield as creators and consumers of information within the internet. Is there a new resultant form of society that can emerge when the state itself becomes an information abstract, fuelled by an external economy it has no control over? If so, how would such an entity perceive its own identity and future? Will it be a society more resilient to the potential forces of human and natural destruction? Will this be a society of flux and radical transformation, able to craft a new hybrid identity by not being bound to its ‘land’ but unified by data, communication and sharing of knowledge? Perhaps this will become the world’s first truly ‘open society’. It may be formed however not by the traditional meanings and intentions of open and collaborative systems, but by the TLD’s

1 http://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Fidel_Castro

2 http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Outline_of_Tuvalu

3 http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Economy_of_Tuvalu

resultant accidental collision of greed, competition and disregard upon a population historically isolated from the forces of modernity.

Laura Balboa speaks of “mutation and adaptation” in the economic and social structures that are a result of the .tv TLD. These are necessary ingredients in the evolutionary process, but in this case we are also faced with the processes of dissolution and transformation – of a state into ether. This creates an interesting foundation for harnessing the chaotic and perhaps violent energies, not unlike the eruption of a volcano, that can be released in the throes of revolution. A revolution to dissolution, a dissipation of power, followed by a loss of control and direction.

American author and philosopher Marshall Berman described this process as the fundamental turbulence which frames modernity, keeping it separate from the complacency of the status quo, of frivolous post-modern blindness. He borrowed the most digitally vivid passage from the Communist Manifesto – “All that is solid melts into air ...” – to describe this cataclysmic view of modernism:

“To be modern, I said, is to experience personal and social life as a maelstrom, to find one’s world and oneself in perpetual disintegration and renewal, trouble and anguish, ambiguity and contradiction: to be part of a universe in which all that is solid melts into air. To be a modernist is to make oneself somehow at home in the maelstrom, to make its rhythms one’s own, to move within its currents in search of the forms of reality, of beauty, of freedom, of justice, that its fervid and perilous flow allows.”⁴

For Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, this dissolution of materiality signalled the moment in which “(hu)man(ity) is at last compelled to face with sober senses his real conditions of life, and his relations with his kind.”⁵

By fusing the greatest social, economic and political ‘powers’ of our time, television, the internet, and mobile media into the narrative of the fragile and ephemeral micro-state of Tuvalu, *internetis.tv* emerges as a powerful example of the reality of social action and cause. We are able to understand and appreciate the cultural plight of the Tuvalese – without the necessity of forcibly entering and disturbing their cultural space. We are able to access their space through the shared vocabularies of our networked lives, and in so doing form a critical understanding of the mechanisms of control and potential domination that lurk behind the mechanisms of the .tv TLD.

Consequently, we can observe what may also become a new form of socio-economic process, not unlike the theory of cognitive capitalism as outlined by the P2P Foundation.⁶ As a third phase of capitalism after mercantile and industrial capitalism,

⁴ *All That Is Solid Melts Into Air, The Experience of Modernity*, verso ninth edition Pages 345-346, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marshall_Berman

⁵ <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1848/communist-manifesto/ch01.htm> (Marx and Engels, Second Congress of the Communist League, London, November 29 - December 8, 1847)

⁶ http://p2pfoundation.net/Cognitive_Capitalism

cognitive capitalism sees “accumulation as being centered on immaterial assets”. In the case of Tuvalu and the .tv TLD we enter a scenario in which physically, the state is gone, the accumulation of wealth, assets and resources continues ... but without clarity as to whom the beneficiary is, other than the service provider. If such immateriality becomes the key asset of cognitive capitalism, then the erosion of the commons into private entities may also become unavoidable. The .tv TLD itself, by its coincidental nature in association with the legitimacy of the state, is a monopolistic entity. It becomes a living example of cognitive capitalism, its products being cheap and easy to produce, so “they have to be kept in a state of artificial scarcity through IP protection”.

Given such scenarios of dissolution and the transformation of state and economic conditions, one of the resultant artistic speculations lurking in the shadows of *internetis.tv* is the struggle between immateriality and virtuality. In the artwork, we see Tuvalu’s impending descent into immateriality as a loss of real time, space and matter. The void created by this process is replenished by a new entity – the virtuality of the data, power and hierarchies that form the .tv TLD. The artist sees this as a “reflection on the fate of the media industry of the last millennium and their evolutionary desire”. In so doing, the artist exposes the media industry’s inevitable pursuit of global domination beyond democratic and openly participatory forms of self-determination. Her response – *internetis.tv* signals an initiating warning shot in the next chapter of the struggle to maintain the commons, accessible communication and the sharing of knowledge open and within the exclusive domain of the world’s citizens.

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