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Infrastructure Solidarity

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Abstract

Infrastructure Solidarity is part of The Relearning Series, an editorial project initiated by Martino Morandi and Jara Rocha on the ongoing techno-political transformations in (remote) educational, learning and research environments. It is a collective attempt to articulate how to infrastructure otherwise, in more just and solidary ways. Faced with the urgencies and difficulties that emerge from the intensified dependencies of mediated learning on totalitarian innovation, the series starts from the feeling that the necessary thinking and doing should happen in multiple places, formats, tones and rhythms, and in connection with each other.

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Proprietary platforms are far from neutral spaces. In subtle or less subtle ways, they push the extractive modes of private corporations onto personal devices, and we all know it. We have seen how tech giants used the pandemic condition not only to make unreasonable profits but they have moved already precarious public administration, health-care, commerce and education deeper into the cloud; this is obviously in the interest of their shareholders, but not in the interest of public life. The hard part is that while this might not be a surprise to anyone, the tectonic infrastructural shifts that normalized the dependency on commercial on-line platforms, have already been underway for a while. Individuals and institutions have come to rely on transglobal companies to facilitate collective learning, political organising and social life. We are trained to expect smooth and seamless on-line experiences that require the kind of deep pockets, longevity and vision that politics chose not to engage with and public institutions fail to provide. It has become near impossible to imagine a different type of life with digital tools, let alone to dream of solidary digital infrastructures that can be collectively owned, maintained and used.

Last spring, a conventional Open Source software solution for web conferencing, BigBlueButton, joined a collection of digital tools that Constant¹ has been experimenting with for over two decades. Constant is a Brussels based association for art and media, a cultural organisation which operates on the intersection of feminisms, technological practice and collective authorship. Constant generates performative publishing, curatorial processes, poetic software, experimental research and educational prototypes; we also host a slowly evolving infrastructure made up of a patchwork of Free, Libre and Open Source tools, from feminist servers to etherpad collaborative writing tools. Their licensing conditions and developers' culture allow us to engage in digital practice as a space for debate, reflection and artistic experiments. For us it is both important and interesting to contribute to informatics other than the abusive modes of tech-corporations.

Hosting an instance of BigBlueButton (BBB) is technically, economically and politically something else than signing up for a license. Commercial platforms set up a client-server relationship with their users by providing "Software As a Service", a model where the service-provider determines conditions for use, distribution of resources and access to data streams. To host a BBB instance, we first downloaded the software which the community that develops the platform decided to share for free. Our colleague who takes care of system administration and maintenance then installed it on an on-line server. We re-allocated the unused travel funds from a project on digital collaboration to pay for extra bandwidth and server space, which comes down to half of the price of a commercial license.

While MS Teams, Zoom and Google Hangout are first of all tools for business management or software production, BBB is "designed for on-line learning". BBB's interface and features will look familiar, but its strength is in the features that it lacks: users do not need to install an application; there is no dashboard for access control, no activity dashboard, no attendance management, no streamlined integration into email clients or other office-ware. The software does have a collective drawing board; it provides users with a shared canvas to signal and sense presence in subtler ways than the forced frontality of video-connections while using a fraction of the CPU and bandwidth.

The biggest advantage of BBB is probably the modest scale it operates on, compared to its commercial alternatives. A small group of not more than thirty people contributes regularly to the development of its code base. It means updates will occur at most every three months and changes are documented and discussed on a publicly accessible platform. The economic model of the project includes voluntary code contributions but is largely based on paid development, financed by optional commercial support and hosting. This mode of operation stands in stark contrast to the fast paced world of Zoom, a listed company now worth over 130 billion dollar. Zoom currently employs 2800 people worldwide, and updates on a continuous basis. Decisions these companies make are obviously determined by cut throat market laws, dragging individuals and institutions into high octane modes of operation. A little less latency comes at the price of extractive practices such as workers exploitation, autocratic power abuse, normalized surveillance, dispossession of public life and the deployment of ever more resource-hungry server farms.

From mid-April onward, Constant's BBB instance could host on-line on-line meetings with up to 60 people at the same time. Like earlier initiatives by hackerspaces in Italy and Amsterdam, we let the web address circulate by word of mouth and anyone can sign up for an account without asking permission. Participants do not have to pay for using the platform; we just ask them to signal to each other if they plan larger meetings in a shared agenda to work out if there is enough bandwidth for everyone. By the fall, four to five convenings are hosted per day, and a few hundred people have signed up to do much more than keeping up productivity under pandemic conditions. Artist workshops, feminist tech sessions, queer gatherings, alternative housing meetings, deconstructions of White Supremacy and many educational activities in-between independent research and institutional life, are finding an on-line base to organize from.

It is a delicate balance, between becoming a service provider and providing much needed space for other experiences with technology. Structurally funded educational and cultural organizations do not always notice how the conditions of this instance are different from *free* services or institutional licenses. Instead of asking for a contribution, we invite them to install their own instance so that people without institutional backup can keep using our service, or start using theirs. The Constant BBB instance is a testing ground for convincing colleagues and superiors that it is possible to host your own; several installs follow in art schools and universities in Belgium and elsewhere.

Infrastructural solidarity only starts with tools like BBB and it should obviously not end there. What we will need to do, is to develop relationships with technology that acknowledge vulnerability, mutual dependency and care-taking. For Constant it meant to get involved in initiatives that experiment with blended learning otherwise; to gather cultural actors in Brussels and implement load-balancing techniques between multiple BBB installs, to contribute to plans for broadcasting BBB to streaming platforms for cultural events that now rely on Facebook live and YouTube streaming. These concrete efforts interconnect with other initiatives both at larger and smaller scale, slowly building a convivial technological landscape that instead of driving optimization, normalization and quick solutions, flourishes with curiosity, multiplicity and many possibilities.