

## **The consequences of framing free culture as a social movement**

Alek Tarkowski

Creative Commons Poland / University of Warsaw

The phenomenon of free culture has not yet been properly defined in sociological terms, and the majority of research on free culture seems to be based in legal, media or information studies. From the viewpoint of sociology, free culture is an association, of some sort, of human and institutional actors, together with associated social and cultural practices. For lack of a better one, I will use here the term *free cultural activism* to describe my object of interest.

I believe that this association should be more precisely defined as a social movement. This proposition is obvious and often stated by activists and practitioners, but to my knowledge has not been investigated by researchers of free culture. The phenomenon of free cultural activism has all the elements expected of a modern, global and networked, social movement (della Porta, Kriesi and Rucht 1999). It fits the description of a New Social Movement, in which a heterogeneous range of actors are tied together by a common identity, shared meanings or collective imaginary (Appadurai 1996). As is typical of such movements, the movement struggles in the name of broad cultural change rather than material stakes – fitting into the current shift towards postmateriality [Inglehart]. If we agree with Alain Tourraine that a social movement's struggle has as its goal the change of *historicity*, or society's „great cultural orientations” (Tourraine 1981) – then free cultural activism, focused upon key regulatory mechanisms and models of production in knowledge-based societies, should be seen as one of key social movements of today.

By defining free culture activism in terms of a social movement, activists could benefit from a wide body of research on social movement activity, movement dynamics, organizational challenges, and so on. Parallels could be drawn with other social movements – especially with the environmental movement, following James Boyle's insight that free cultural activism is a new form of environmentalism (Boyle 1997).

But more importantly, free cultural activism has several unique characteristics as a social movement. These are mainly tied, in my opinion to the specificity of digital goods and symbolic production, the shape of which is at heart of the free cultural struggle. The specificity of such goods and the democratization of cultural activity that it ensures together with new modes of social organization has been well researched (Benkler 2006). Free cultural activity stretches the concept of activism and social change – since change is

partially achieved by production and reuse of content, rather than just by traditional political or protest activities (which of course also takes place). Furthermore, this activity is partially achieved by everyday acts of cultural consumption, copying of content, or remix and reuse.

In the case of global, networked social movements, and unlike previous political or workers' movements, researchers by definition should not expect clear boundaries. Yet the issue of delimiting the extent of the sphere of free culture is an important task. Is free cultural activism limited to an "activist core" (with Creative Commons activists or Wikipedians being a clear example), or is it a much broader, popular movement? This is an issue dependent on the existence (or lack of) common identity and shared values. In other words, are teenagers who download, reuse, remix and mash-up content part of this movement? This is also a question of identifying the relation between free cultural activism and pirate activism (which also displays a division between an activist core and a potential popular movement). Is everyday cultural activity, to which free cultural activism applies, is a subject or object of this activism?

Furthermore, there is also the issue of the relation between free culture on one hand and the Web with web-based culture as a whole. One can argue that key characteristics of the technology, which is open and generative (Zittrain 2006), make it isomorphic to free culture (Hofmokl 2008). Yet such a simple view runs the risk of confusing analysis with normative statements. A more fruitful approach would try to map the reach of free culture in the online environment (and beyond it). While such mapping has already partially been conducted (Benkler 2000, 2006), a study of regulatory principles and technological affordances needs to be supplemented by a study of online content (necessitating more complex metrics of free cultural works) and most importantly of user practices. These are shaped, but ultimately independent of both regulation and technology.

I return again to the issue of everyday cultural and social practices. These are still not fully understood, despite significant research conducted in recent years (Jenkins 2006, Ito et al. 2008) – we need a thicker description of these practices in order to understand what is the relation of this sphere to activism that is more directly expressed or more strongly related to free cultural values.

From this perspective, I suggest following challenges to research on free culture:

**1. Role of popular cultural practices.** We need to better investigate and understand everyday practices – production, reuse and copying of content. To what extent everyday users identify with free culture on one hand, and piracy on the other? In particular, we

need to better understand the use of free licenses and the reuse of freely licensed content. What are the motivations of license users? What is the process of reuse and how often does it occur?

**2. Metrics.** More complex quantitative data is required to understand the state of free culture. We need to move beyond metrics for content towards user metrics. A web crawl is also necessary to provide precise data in place of imprecise studies based on linkback data. Thirdly, we need data not just on content production, but also reuse. Research of this sort should be published in the form of a regular report on the state of free culture, at best based on comparative, international data.

**3. Policy oriented research.** Free cultural activists are slowly introducing free licensing into policy regulating availability of scientific content, public sector information or heritage. Yet broader cultural and media policy is still not fully addressing the issues and stakes raised by free culture and its advocacy. Recently, first signs of change can be seen – research on free culture should strive to support such policy initiatives with necessary knowledge and argumentation.

## **Bibliography**

Appadurai, Arjun (1996). *Modernity at Large: cultural dimensions of globalization*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Benkler, Yochai (2000). *From Consumers to Users: Shifting the Deeper Structures of Regulation Toward Sustainable Commons and User Access*. "Federal Communications Law Journal", Vol. 52, part 3, pp. 561-580.

Benkler, Yochai (2006). *The Wealth of Networks: How social production transforms markets and freedom*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press.

Boyle, James (1997). *A Politics of Intellectual Property: Environmentalism for the Net?*, "Duke Law Journal", 1997, vol. 47, no. 1, pp. 87-116.

della Porta, Donatella, Hanspeter Kriesi and Dieter Rucht (eds.) (1999). *Social Movements in a Globalizing World*. London: Macmillan Press

Hofmokl, Justyna (2008). *Internet jako nowe dobro wspólne* [Internet as a New Public Good]. Warsaw: WAiP

Jenkins, Henry (2006). *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*. New York, NY: New York University Press

Ito, Mizuko et al. (2008). *Living and Learning with New Media: Summary of Findings from the Digital Youth Project*. MacArthur Foundation

Touraine, Alain (1981). *The Voice and the Eye*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

Zittrain, Jonathan (2006). *The generative internet*. "Harvard Law Review", 1999 (2006), pp. 1974 – 2040.

## **How will this essay generate broader interest?**

I propose to treat free culture as a social movement, and then look more closely at its popular, everyday aspect. By virtue of the first element, we can more precisely position and ascertain the role of free culture in current social and cultural processes – by employing theories and models of social theory. The second element ties our research more closely with cultural theory and anthropology. Both provide paths of broadening the research scope of this new, interdisciplinary research field.

## **Author's biography**

Alek Tarkowski is a sociologist working at the Interdisciplinary Center for Mathematical and Computational Modelling at the University of Warsaw. He holds an MA in sociology from University of Warsaw and a PhD in Sociology from the Polish Academy of Science. Since 2004, he is the Public Lead of Creative Commons Poland. Since 2008, he is a member of the Board of Strategic Advisors to the Prime Minister of Poland, responsible for the areas of information society and ICT, media and culture. He is a graduate of the Oxford Internet Institute Summer Doctoral Programme and the iLaw program at the Harvard Law School's Berkman Center. He is also involved in project “Culture 2.0”, an informal network and series of events about new digital culture about which he blogs at <http://kultura20.blog.polityka.pl>.