

STITCHING TOGETHER AN EDITORIAL SEWING CIRCLE

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Fragmented stories of an *editorial sewing circle* are temporarily sewn together. We thereby explore what public emerged through the combination of two known situations and collectives for sharing, joining, and negotiating stories: the *sewing circle* and the *editorial board*. Although we make texts and textiles public, the focus was also on *being* public – inviting people to become part of the *editorial sewing circle's* negotiation processes.

Introduction

"I am so angry with you, because you say so many relevant things!"

This SMS was embroidered and published in the magazine *Aluma*. It was the invitation to collaboratively compose a feuilleton based on participants' text messages. These mobile-phone text-messages were embroidered, shared and negotiated at an *editorial sewing circle* hosted by the authors of this paper at Gallery KRETS in Malmö, Sweden in 2009. The final version of the feuilleton, what was decided in the editorial process, was also published in *Aluma*. At the last day of the *editorial sewing circle* a *patchwork-seminar* was held at the gallery to discuss editorial boards and sewing circles as historical, professional and artistic practices of storytelling, collaboration, production and power. During the seminar each of the four authors of this paper placed text-patches on the floor, and invited the participants of the seminar to do the same.

Fragmented stories of this *editorial sewing circle* are temporarily sewn together in this paper. We thereby explore what public emerged through the combination of two known situations and collectives for sharing, joining, and negotiating realities and stories: the *sewing circle* and the *editorial board*.

By engaging ourselves in the craft of story-quilting (Bränström Öhman and Livholts 2007), in the seminar and in the writing of this paper, we hope to draw attention to the seams: the things that separate as well as hold together.

Sewing Circle

The first major patch in this textual quilt, trying to reflect upon our editorial sewing circle, is the notion of the sewing circle. What usually defines the sewing circle is the sewing together, be it on individual or joint projects. What is being made public from these gatherings are the products of the decision-making of what should pass as social goods, in all aspects. One example is Church-quilts, traditional communal-products of the village sewing-circle, where the circle of women made decisions of patches of moral stories to be passed-on and told as textile texts, traditionally given as rite-de-passage gifts to girls, thus influencing the social order of villages.

Historically, the sewing circle seems to have been used as a means of disguising power under the cloak of meeting for an ostensibly lesser cause, while really discussing important matters. They have functioned as semi-secret discussion groups, letting the formal power rest in the hands of others. Sewing-societies is another example of a covert public realm where women have turned the unpaid time to benefit the community, for example by auctioning their goods and using the profit to pay for lampposts as well as send money to people in need. It is more open in form than the closed circle and have existed in Sweden at least since 1840. This has been described in several texts by Louise Waldén (1997; 2001). She has written about the cultural history of women, seen through the example of textile crafts, drawing on experiences from the fields of both women's rights movement, technique in connection with social change and handicraft associations.

THE TEXTILE AS TEXT SPELLING OUT SURVIVAL STRATEGIES

In the seminal text "What constitutes powerlessness" Waldén tries to read textile as a text of which the culture and literal heritage have primarily been formulated in a feminine context. She sees two stories. On the one hand a description of textile production marking one the darkest chapters in women's history in terms of exploitation and terrible working-conditions. And – on the other side – as a dignity description of the pride, care and concern for the sparse but treasured textile of the workers home, and linen cupboards of the noblewomen alike. Waldén suggests a third reading style: "Stories of survival strategies under the cover of textile. Being able to read the fabric's text requires knowledge of women's history, condition and culture." Only then, she states, the textile text lends itself to reading. And only then the separatist seclusion can be seen as a refusal to comply to an unequal power structure and a refusal to allow the formal lack of power to be matched by real powerlessness.

UNDER-COVER POWER

History shows us, as told by Waldén, that the sewing circle may be used as an under-cover method to induce power into an unequal power structure. The caricature-like gender-dichotomy is an enlightenment-heritage. What is or was constructed as masculine was per definition the opposite of the feminine. Strong, rational, public sphere, metal craft and art, hard news equal masculine. Weak, emotional, private sphere, textile craft, soft news equal feminine. And the masculine sphere equals everything with high status, while the feminine equals everything with low status (Rosenqvist, 2007; Melin, 2008).

Throughout the twentieth century working with textiles has been professionalised within for example handicraft associations (Rosenqvist, 2007). The connotation to the home and the feminine crafts served as a legitimising factor when women went from working in their own homes to working in the boutiques of the handicraft associations, thus making public some of the chores of the private sphere. The separate sphere can thus be read as a means of under-cover power recognizing the difference, of teaming up with other, like-minded individuals, of forming a meeting-point and a protocol that is defying power.

APPROPRIATED SEWING CIRCLES

One of the many contemporary artists and activists who have used the under-cover method of the sewing circle is Malin Arnell. She hosted a sewing circle as part of an art exhibition in Trehörnahult, Sweden during the summer of 2001. Those attending were women in the neighbourhood, but also random visitors. Arnell created an open space for textile craft and conversation during the entire period. She

states in her invitation: “The invisible is equally significant and important as the visible. I want to feel that I am needed, I want to feel like I am part of a community, and I want equality.”

The sewing circle was used for its power to transform private chores and applied craft into public art. The way in which Arnell was touching upon the important aspect of making public was to invite everybody to add to a communal tapestry by embroidering “I feel that I am needed” and sign with their name.

CRAFTIVISM

Crafts in various forms has had an upsurge in the last 15 years. This renewed interest takes different forms – from learning the different techniques to craft activism (Åhlvik & von Busch, 2010). Ele Carpenter (2010) points out that the increasing interest in handicraft also have brought about commercialisation of knitting, which she exemplifies with a surplus of knitted cakes. She argues that the knitted cakes have confused the political intentions of activist craft, which focuses on doing and making things together rather than buying things, locally produced or not. Often these activists are aiming at the public sphere. Knitted graffiti – with the original Knitta Please crew formed by Magda Sayeg in Austin, Texas in 2005 – is one example of the latter (Levine 2008). Knitted graffiti might serve as an example of the advantages – or the critical potential – of working anonymously but more importantly outside the institutions. On their website (www.knittaplease.com) the crew members present themselves under fictitious names as anonymous yet individual parts of a subversive whole – promoting the power of the movement and the strength of the textile metaphors, not the knitters as individuals. Whereas Arnell urge participants to sign their art pieces individually and then put them together, Knitta Please find it empowering not signing communal work at all. In comparison with sewing circles that raised money for new lampposts, groups like Knitta Please knit-in lampposts, financed by the welfare system. These are two different ways of making a mark or acting in the public.

Editorial Board

A second patch in this quilt of understandings of the stitched-together editorial sewing circle is the editorial board. In the field of journalism editorial boards organise and control news production. They put reality together with the help of a hierarchical and bureaucratic news-organisation, and distribute news-products to the public. The tasks of the editorial boards is to get an overview of information, value it according to quality and news-value, then set the production process moving by delegating tasks, so that the information becomes formatted news-products, whether broadcast, printed or digitally published.

POWER AT WORK

Newsrooms and editorial boards are conflict-ridden places of male power-play (eg. DeBruin, Ross, 2007; Melin, 2008). The concept *doxa* can be used to decipher these inherently gendered powered conflicts as *doxa*, what we believe about the world, ourselves, our attitudes and behaviours – perceived common sense – is what is at stake in these conflicts (Bourdieu, 1998).

The *doxa* of journalism, is what is defined as journalism, what should be news, and how it should be presented, as well as how to do journalism, how to be a journalist, how to interview, dress, act, think as a journalist. In a study of British and Swedish journalism Melin (2008) found strong *doxas*. In the central

stage was the journalist – a white hetero-sexual, protestant male; a tough guy, slugger and bloodhound, who chases news in order to reveal crooks – all the while being objective and distant. This doxa was lived through decisions made in editorial boards, and reflected in the published news.

STRATEGIES TO STAY IN POWER

A way to understand how dominating players in the field of journalism hold on to the power (to define doxa) and handle conflicts in newsrooms and editorial boards is to use military language. Strategies are used on battlefields by dominating players, who have a power-base, a place from where they use strategies to ward off unwanted others (deCerteau 1984).

Melin found that editors, high-ranking journalists – often male – elite-players on the field of journalism in Britain and Sweden used a number of strategies, such as dichotomising journalism into gendered differences of important hard news and unimportant soft *female* news.

In the UK, Melin found a pub-strategy. The *guys* continued newsroom crude banter, macho jargon and power-play over a pint in the pub. Scottish pubs are by definition masculine places, where few have female lavatories, which makes pubs closed spaces for but the most courageous women. Also, these pubs were the hang-outs of politicians, the very important news-sources journalists seek. Tomorrow's news-stories were thus made in these pubs. Also, as the editors and journalists alike hung out together, tomorrow's editorial boards and morning-meetings were often predetermined in the pub, as was the division of stories and patches.

MEDIA ACTIVISM: PATCHING-UP SURVIVAL-TACTICS

According to Bourdieu the field of journalism is doxic, i.e. there is supposedly only one way of seeing journalism. Not so, argues Melin. She found outspoken and under-cover opposition, alternative ways of thinking and doing journalism, termed *alldoxa* by Bourdieu. There were journalists that questioned news-values, and argued that the *important* news are the so called soft (female) news, that objectivity is but a chimera, and that hunting down crooks and chasing after politicians is indeed cowboy-journalism in its worst sense.

GUERILLA TACTICS

In response to the symbolic violence of strategies used by powerful journalists, oppositional groups use *tactics*, which de Certeau likens with guerrilla-warfare. Melin showed that a number of tactics were used by many journalists (mainly women) in order to enter the field, to get a place and a career, indeed to cope in every-day-journalism. Most of these tactics were done with hands above-the-quilt, with raised voices trying to change the very nature of journalism. There were women who tried to be *one-of-the-boys*, who dressed and acted in a manly fashion, cracked sexist jokes and hung out in the pub. They accepted the doxa, with news-values and ways of doing journalism, but opposed the gendered logic of journalism. Many of the best known female journalists in Sweden and Britain have used this tactic, some seen in bullet-proof-vests on television-screens from war-zones all over the world, or known as “hard-nosed” interviewers in high-powered television-programs.

Other journalists (mainly women) tried to change the very nature of journalism, by trying to create spaces where an allodoxic journalism was possible, where the hierarchic newsroom could become an including and creative space, where ethics matter and where subjective and analytical reportages are rewarded, and where other stories could be told. Designated female spaces, like *Women's Page* and *Women's Hour* in Britain and *Idagsidan*, *Freja* and *Radio Ellen* in Sweden are some examples where women created spaces inside news-medium. There are also examples of alternative *medium*, like the Scottish feminist magazine *Harpies and Quines* that was created by some female journalists with negative experience of traditional news-rooms. These, more historic, examples were resource-wise limited. With today's new technology a number of new alternative spaces turn up on the quilt that is the media-landscape. It is now possible for people with allodoxic approach to journalism to create their own blog, or facebook site. *Feministing.com*, *bullybloggers.wordpress.com*, *Feministiskt perspektiv* are but a few examples of such platforms, where journalists and bloggers set up their own agenda and manage to embroider their own versions of reality. And to draw a link to the historic past, Lesely Riddoch, one of the editors of *Harpies and Quines* has created several alternative media, eg. the webpaper *Africa-woman*.

It is important to point out that the tactics found are not static. Indeed they are dynamic on many levels. First, individual journalists changed their tactics over time, according to what best suited their different life-situation. Secondly, groups of oppositional journalists did not simply act in defence. They took specific strategies and turned them around, eg. male journalists have used social networking as a way to keep unwanted others out, thus female journalists created their own network, which has strengthened their positions.

Stitching Together an Editorial Sewing Circle

Let us patch up these different professional and artistic forms for storytelling, collaboration, production and power-relations by looking back at the *editorial sewing circle* that we created at gallery KRETS. Like in most sewing circles we had set the table with cookies, coffee and tea. Together with passers-by, we spent time embroidering, telling and listening to stories. The embroidered messages were temporarily hung on clothes-lines which made it possible to constantly re-write the emerging narrative through moving the messages around.

Both sewing circles and editorial boards relate to the public sphere. But what kind of public was created through stitching them together into an editorial sewing circle? Who were the actors? What were the concerns?

The actors at KRETS ranged from crafts-women, artists, people who wanted to write articles for Aluma, regular visitors to the gallery, our friends and colleagues, as well as passers-by.

Some of the concerns that were brought up during the patchwork seminar were the separation between art and craft, feminist potential of bringing craft into the art world, subversive power of working within areas that are considered of less importance, why and why not separatist groups can be empowering, what is considered newsworthy or of public interest as well as what is dismissed as gossip and hen-talk.

The authors of this text – who are also researchers-artists and perhaps main actors in the editorial sewing circle – have had our own concerns and agendas that ranged from (un)disciplining academia, arts and craft and to create publics.

In our attempt to put research and practices of sewing-circles and editorial boards together, one conclusion is that the survival strategies Waldén refers to have their sibling activity in what DeCerteau have described as guerrilla tactics and we use in the field of journalism. One of our main arguments is that there is a tendency for oppositional groups to appropriate types of strategies used by those in power, and turning them around. On the one hand contexts such as the sewing circle can be used as a power-base to create potentially empowering networks precisely because those spheres are not considered important. And on the other hand things such as handicraft or so called soft news are made more important through bringing them into the public through knitting lampposts as well as creating one's own platforms for publishing. What is termed 'gossip' in sewing circles becomes power-talk, private knitting becomes knitting-graffiti in public spaces, soft, female journalism becomes influential feminist blogs.

When considering what kind of public that emerged through our editorial sewing circle we could make a distinction between being public and making public. In traditional sewing circles and editorial boards the meetings and negotiations that go on in them are not accessible to everybody nor made public. Parts of these negotiations are however more or less explicitly made public through publications, textiles such as quilts or action for change. In our editorial sewing circle one version of the *SMS-embroidery-feuilleton* was made public through publishing it in Aluma. But, the point was not only to make it public, the focus was also on being public – inviting people to become part of the *editorial sewing circle*. In the gallery space we opened up for discussions, negotiations and questions. All of these debates were, however, not made public when publishing in Aluma nor did we make a joint action beyond the editorial sewing circle. In this paper we try to publish and make some of our negotiations accessible.

All formats of narration have their limitations. SMS has its 160 characters. Aluma offered one spread to publish the SMS-embroidery-feuilleton. At KRETS we had three days and two hours for the patchwork seminar, transcribed to about 30 pages. In this paper our action space is 3200 words.

In the welcoming statement at KRETS we noted that there are many voices in the room which are not heard. Some voices are silenced because of the format, comparable to how not everything can be included in an SMS restricted to 160 characters. A risk in writing in the mode of story-quilting is that it looks too smooth, that we work too well with the given format, restrictions and possibilities. How can you as a reader distinguish the four authors' voices? Is the unified yet separate voice escaping accountability? Who is responsible for the choices made in the process of writing this? Is it necessary to know in this context? One suggestion when reading this text is to pay conscious attention to the seams, to see what separate and hold together the patches. And, perhaps, with Waldén's words, the reading of the seams and patches require knowledge of certain women's histories, conditions and cultures.

Throughout this story-quilting-project we have acted in already existing publics, such as a magazine, a gallery and an academic conference. In those established spaces we have also created our own publics by re-negotiating the forms of the existing, such as the sewing circle, the editorial board and the feuilleton. Thereby we have been working both within the power and also created action spaces.

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