

SPEAKERS

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Computer
Craig Gent

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live streaming resistance.

GUESTS

Rom Dziadkiewicz

Craig Gent

00:00 ROM DZIADKIEWICZ
[Sigh] Okay, UKRAiNATV back and...

00:04 COMPUTER
We drift together towards...

00:07 ROM DZIADKIEWICZ
Nice to meet you...

00:07 CRAIG GENT
Nice to meet you too.

00:10 ROM DZIADKIEWICZ
...physically in UKRAiNATV studio. Amazing guest, Craig Gent, here. But we are in touch in the last few months, actually, collaborating across StreamArtNetwork, but for me, this is amazing occasion to talk also...

00:36 COMPUTER
[Knocking, echo]

00:37 ROM DZIADKIEWICZ
...mostly about your past. About your history in independent media activism...

00:46 CRAIG GENT
[Laughs]

00:46 ROM DZIADKIEWICZ

...about Novara Media, that you used to work there more than 10 years, yeah?

00:54 CRAIG GENT

Mhm.

00:55 ROM DZIADKIEWICZ

Craig is editor, director, author also of a very important book that we will talk a little bit about, I hope later. But yeah, this is what I found that maybe is good to ask you about: the very beginning of Novara Media. Because for us here and now, it's also a kind of case study and a kind of learning process of how to do this very grassroots, small project, one that's possible to grow up into a laboratory for utopian working/thinking about media production, co-production. So tell us a bit about the very beginning of Novara Media and your activity there at the beginning.

02:04 CRAIG GENT

Yeah, okay, so Novara Media began in 2011. In 2010 in Britain, you had a very big student movement. This was largely a response to the election of a coalition government in 2010 of the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats, who embarked on a big austerity programme following the financial crisis and the massive cutting of the public sector, public services and also cuts to higher education, as well as an increase in student tuition fees. So this created a very big student movement that became quite radicalised quite quickly. In November 2010 there was a massive demonstration, 52,000 students on the streets of London, and that culminated in the students taking over and occupying the offices of the ruling

Conservative party and smashing into the building, getting up onto the roof, which then led to a series of follow-up demonstrations, a big wave of occupations across universities all over the country, so a real radical crucible of activism for students. But at some time in 2011, just about the time that participation was declining, especially because we lost the fight against tuition fees, the conversations were getting really interesting. And so in the occupations we were having these quite deep conversations about political ideas. And Novara first began as a place to have those conversations and to keep having them, and I suppose, for want of a better word, to sort of institutionalise those conversations, to give them a form so that they could be returned to. So Novara in 2011 just began as a radio show on a community radio station in London, and then we would get the recording, and we could put it on Mixcloud or on SoundCloud, and people could access it. This is kind of pre-podcasts in the form that we know them now. This continued for a couple of years, and then in 2013 there was the ambition to broaden it out, to become Novara Media. And the idea was that there would be a website with articles and things, but also there would be a video dimension as well. So this is the point in time when I got involved, 2013. Safe to say there was no funding, no arts money. There were no wages. We were all just volunteers, just doing a thing for the passion of it. But in a way, I suppose it was like the one remaining political project that outlasted the student movement and really came from that moment in time and has continued ever since. And I suppose the organisation really then grew again around 2015-2017. There was a big political appetite for that kind of media in the country at that time. 2017 we started livestreaming for the first time. I was telling you earlier that I think our first livestream was 40 guests, seven hours, one camera and one microphone. So we were always creaking under the weight of our ambitions, but today Novara Media is a project that I'm very proud to

have been involved with for 11 years. It's a full-time news organisation, but it also does commentary. It still has the podcast that started it. It now has many other podcasts as well under its umbrella, and it's able to pay people a wage, and the way it does that is because it's supporter-funded, and so it's the viewers and the readers who freely donate. They don't get anything in return, they freely donate to the project to make it possible.

06:25 ROM DZIADKIEWICZ

So it's an NGO, it's an organisation, how is it formed?

06:32 CRAIG GENT

I don't know if I'd call it an NGO, no, it's a media organisation.

06:40 ROM DZIADKIEWICZ

Mhm.

06:41 CRAIG GENT

But it's supporter-funded, and so people just donate through the website. And then Novara Media has a good relationship with its supporters and develops a range of outputs - TV shows, podcasts and things like that.

07:01 ROM DZIADKIEWICZ

Yeah, it's a long way from this one camera and totally like a few guys, a few friends, doing things in the street...

07:14 CRAIG GENT

Yeah, it's quite different.

07:16 ROM DZIADKIEWICZ

...to this quite big organisation, with still like a precarious danger in the background, or as a context, yeah? How is it possible to do that...? I'm asking about the, I don't know, management maybe, or is it something that you could spread as a model of a business?

07:51 CRAIG GENT

Yeah, I'd like to think so. And the main thing that's disappointed me about the project over the years is that there haven't been more Novara Medias emerging, because I would like there to be a thousand Novara Medias.

08:04 ROM DZIADKIEWICZ

Totally. In my question, is this kind of imagination.

08:07 CRAIG GENT

Exactly, yeah. I think what happened with Novara is that we got to this point that a lot of organisations get to where they realise that to make it sustainable and to keep going, something big has to change. And so for us, that meant that we had to have some money coming in from somewhere. That was kind of growth phase one. We began to crowdfund in a sort of serious way. And with that we started paying for the things that we really couldn't continue not paying for. So we had to buy some kit, and we had to pay writers and things like that, but we didn't pay ourselves. We actually paid ourselves last, which I think is one of the main things that distinguishes us from any kind of NGO, because they will pay the staff costs first. And maybe that was a silly decision, but you know, we ran on passion for a long time, and it felt unnecessary. But then

the second, more crucial, moment was when we began to have the conversation about paying ourselves and how that would work, and how that would try to sustain the organisation. And that conversation, I have to say, actually went quite smoothly in our organisation, which probably spoke to the sort of very strong solidarity that that happened inside of it. Actually, I remember at that meeting, we had someone involved, just in that meeting, who had been involved with lots of different activist groups and things, and he was kind of observing, and he said afterwards, "I've seen organisations tear themselves apart over that question." And we got through it in a couple of hours. But what we did was, we had an ambition to pay people...

10:00 ROM DZIADKIEWICZ

Yeah.

10:00 CRAIG GENT

...inside our organisation. That conversation was a conversation amongst us all as equals. We didn't have enough money to pay everyone for all the time they were putting into it, and so we kind of means-tested our wages. We said, "Okay, what do we think everyone should have as a minimum to live on per month? What do people already have coming in as income; maybe they're doing a PhD, maybe they already have a part-time job or something like that? And then we will pay people enough to reach this threshold so we're all living on the same wage." Which meant then we could all go part-time for the organisation. And then we actually went full-time one month before the lockdown, which was kind of good timing, in a way, because then we were in a really good position to expand enormously.

10:56 ROM DZIADKIEWICZ

To expand, to exist...

10:59 CRAIG GENT

Exactly, yeah.

11:00 ROM DZIADKIEWICZ

...in this strange moment, which was difficult to do something together, but on the other hand, I think for this kind of media project, it was also like a laboratory.

11:12 CRAIG GENT

Yeah, I think it came naturally to us. A lot of established journalistic organisations - you know, the ones that don't have an activist background, which is most of them - I think really struggled to adapt. But we had already spent two years producing videos in the street because we didn't have a studio, and then we were producing them inside people's houses because we didn't have a studio. And so then to just go back to doing things remotely was very simple for us, really, not without some challenges, of course, but yeah, I think it was a really interesting time, because it felt experimental. The other thing I wanted to say is that alongside the kind of money question, we had to have this conversation around our commitment to the project and to each other, which is a really hard transition point for any organisation that wants to become sustainable, especially, frankly, if you're going to make the jump from being volunteers to being employees. Novara doesn't have any bosses. It's kind of nice like that, but like it does have employees, people who work there are employees, and that means making a commitment to the

organisation and to the mission, and especially for a lot of organisations who are making that transition, you don't want to be in a position where, frankly, you have to enforce any kind of contract because you don't have the infrastructure. You can't. It's also going to be, like, horrible, you know. So you have to be sure that the people you're doing this with are really on the same page about the mission, which is not to say thinking the same thing.

12:58 ROM DZIADKIEWICZ

Yeah.

12:59 CRAIG GENT

And that's really important to say. Novara has always been a politically pluralistic project. People have always had different politics in the organisation, but everyone shared the same overall commitment to the project. That's quite a big difference, I think.

13:17 ROM DZIADKIEWICZ

Yeah. Mm, the next question, or kind of way of thinking about this could be... What is the drive? What is the most... Or, let's collect a few factors, aspects of this kind of project, directly based on your experiences in Novara. Because there is one more question behind this about automatizations, in a way, and luxury communism. But later.

14:05 CRAIG GENT

[Laughs]

14:05 ROM DZIADKIEWICZ

But the first is the question, of course, it is like, kind of a community project. That's people who are the most important, but also like a workflow. That's the work with technology, the work with... this is what, after you're back with this nightmare of the cyberboss. But I think there was also something before. Kind of a dream, yeah? To combine this human energy and nonhuman energy. I would like to ask you about this sensitive moment or this space in between.

14:56 CRAIG GENT

[Laughs] Yeah. Well, I suppose the first thing to say is that I always saw Novara as having a dual purpose. At some points, this is more explicit, and at some points it was maybe more implicit. But Novara, in my mind, always had a dual purpose of trying to provide the means for the movement - by which we mean, social movement, labour movement politics, leftwing movement, whatever it is - allow the movement to speak to itself, to kind of provide this possibility of reflection, and a space for reflection, but at the same time to elevate some of those ideas and introduce them to people who wouldn't come across them anywhere else. They would come across ideas in Novara that you're not going to come across in your undergraduate degree or on the news or in a magazine or in the newspaper. And so those two commitments are actually really hard to navigate, and it's an ongoing process. And actually it means, I think, that a lot of people feel that you're letting them down along the way, if something you're doing is trying to reach new audiences, but they, in that moment, want you to be creating something that is allowing them to speak to themselves. Those two goals can be in competition with each other, so it's a really tricky balance to maintain, I think. But I feel like trying to straddle that divide has always given Novara a productive energy that has been useful. And, I don't know, the technology question is an interesting one, because, in truth, I've struggled sometimes to reconcile my years-long

commitment to this online independent media project and my political commitment to interrogating forms of digital mediation within labour. And I think I've sometimes struggled to wrap my head around what the relationship is exactly, despite the fact that the latter question is clearly embedded in what Novara is and has always been. I don't think it's a coincidence that I wrote this book, *Cyberboss*, or that my colleague Aaron [Bastani] wrote this book, *Fully Automated Luxury Communism*. Or, indeed, the fact that Novara Media itself is named for the town in which the film *The Working Class Goes to Heaven* by Elio Petri is set, which is a film fundamentally about the relationship between the human and the machine. And so these things are clearly connected. But I always feel like I'm grasping at the explanation for how they sit together. But maybe that's what gives me my own productive energy: straddling these two things that are occasionally in contradiction with each other.

18:48 ROM DZIADKIEWICZ

Yeah, I think it's totally... we are on the same page, also here [at UKRAiNATV] with this struggling and researching this intersection. So maybe let's think back a little bit about this fully automated luxury communism.

19:13 CRAIG GENT

Mhm.

19:14 ROM DZIADKIEWICZ

What about this radical idea in 2025, when we have technofeudalism-

19:26 CRAIG GENT

What do I think about it?

19:27 ROM DZIADKIEWICZ

What do you think about this now? Or maybe there is the history of your personal position into this.

19:40 CRAIG GENT

I suppose my relationship to that idea has been... I think it is important to situate it historically and to not take it too far away from the roots of the idea. So where this idea came from, as I understand it, is first of all there was this blog that was created by some people who were kind of around the Manchester section of a British Marxist-feminist organisation called Plan C that I used to be involved with, and the blog was called Luxury Communism. And the idea was that it was exploring ideas of abundance and a communal type of luxury, but also through the lens a libertarian communism, it's important to say that - we're not talking about Bolshevism or whatever - it's a libertarian communism. I think, in reality, the libertarian communist or the anarchist movement in Britain had had a tendency towards a certain asceticism. You know, anti-possession or, you know, this quite monk-like attitude that we should be dispensing with everything, and we should all share toothbrushes or whatever, which is obviously a bit of a caricature, but I think that was like a tendency, and instead, people wanted to say, well, surely one of the ambitions of this political project is for everybody to have as much as they need and to have the leisure time that they want, and not to be struggling for resources in this way. And so we should-

21:47 ROM DZIADKIEWICZ

[Tricky?] version of luxury.

21:49 CRAIG GENT

Yeah, yeah. We shouldn't fetishize scarcity. And so it was kind of an aesthetic and a political intervention, I think. And the phrase they elevated was 'luxury for all', which of course confounds the idea of a capitalist luxury. So before fully automated luxury communism, we had luxury communism. And then at certain point, and who knows how these things really happen in the kind of like memesphere, fully automated luxury communism becomes a meme, essentially. And this is kind of interesting, particularly in a British context, because I mentioned these sort of social movements earlier on, but they were very much dominated by social democratic trade unions and socialist politics that really fetishizes the role of work and a 'right to work'. It had been campaigning for jobs, whereas those who were within the libertarian communist movement in Britain said, "No, we should be campaigning for liberation from jobs, not for more jobs."

23:12 ROM DZIADKIEWICZ

The end of the idea is like a post-work society.

23:15 CRAIG GENT

A post-work society, precisely, yeah. And so I think fully automated luxury communism really came about in that sense. You had a critique, first, of the attitude to resources and to leisure and the good life that was quickly followed quite logically, really, by a critique of work itself. And with that, an attitude towards claiming technology for us, rather than for the people who, in fact, control it. So how that looks today... I think realistically the challenges are the same as they were before. We've obviously seen a massive intensification of the ownership of tech platforms

and so on. But I kind of think that the challenge is for anyone who wants to see fully automated luxury communism - and, to be clear, I've always been slightly less enthusiastic about the fully automated part than the luxury communism part - however, I still think fundamentally, whether or not people have that as a goal, the same problems and challenges arise even if your horizon is an internet that realises the promise of what we thought the world wide web could have been. Those are the same problems when it comes to the automated question.

25:01 ROM DZIADKIEWICZ

Yeah, this automatization, I think it has many, many levels and scales. This is why I'm asking about this, because this is also part of the model of this small collective: working together, doing media, doing something like in a small studio in a garage, and sometimes we are like a craftsman in the period of high tech reality around, but in a way, maybe it's good. It's against dehumanization, or something like that. But it's also a slogan from the 20th century, so I'm afraid about being, you know, like a conservative, leftist.

26:03 CRAIG GENT

[Laughs]

26:03 ROM DZIADKIEWICZ

But in the same time, maybe there is a challenge. There is a question to put more attention about particular tools here, for automatization in this kind of a production, remote production, co-production, also for our daily activity in StreamArtNetwork. Because there is a big gap between this interpretation of reality that everything is out of control and we are controlled by automatization and it's all trackers around, yeah? I think Cyberboss is also about this. Is there space to reclaim those tools, to work with

them in our conditions, to help ourselves to work in a more sustainable way?

27:04 CRAIG GENT

Yeah, it's interesting. I hadn't really thought about it in this way. But there is obviously an irony in proclaiming a politics of fully automated luxury communism, and then if I think about the workflow of how an organisation like Novara works, the idea of fully automating it becomes very challenging very quickly. Because it works on this, yeah, kind of like a craft model. In terms of how the division of labour has always looked within Novara, it was recognised very early on that there would have to be a division of labour, but that would be based around skill and competency, really, underpinned by a mutual respect and valuation, an esteem for people's different contributions and competencies. For example, even now that everyone at Novara is paid, everyone is paid the same wage, and that's how it's been since we started. The idea behind that was to ensure that the focus is on the organisation to share labour and to spread labour around. So, if someone's working harder than someone else, rather than paying them different rates, the focus should be to take work away from the person who is overburdened, and having a flat wage reflects back onto the organisation of labour in a way that produces, hopefully, a desired outcome. But I think what's missing here - because, of course, the application of automation to so many jobs, and if we're looking at like the cyberboss examples, and tracking and things like that - I think what's missing is fundamentally something around the politics of information and communication within work. Because the point I make at the heart of Cyberboss, really, is that algorithmic management is organised around not a new principle, but fundamentally a Taylorist principle. It's like a modern day Taylorism, by which I mean - for people who aren't aware -

[Frederick Winslow] Taylor is this big management theorist at the turn of the 20th century, and he's often associated with things like time and motion studies and piece work (so paying people wages for their output, rather than a wage for their time worked), but really I think his fundamental philosophical contribution, if I could put it like that, is the separation of the conception and the execution of work. And so the idea under Taylorism is that you have a division of labour by which a small group of people decide how the work is conceived and what it does and how it operates, and then you have a different group of people who just do the work. And so the people who are thinking about the work and doing the work are not one and the same. And of course, inside Novara, for example, the thinking about the work and the doing of the work are fundamentally one and the same. Of course, there will be strategy conversations and stuff like that, or ongoing judgement calls to make, it happens in any organisation. But there are always these kind of impulses to make sure that the conception and execution of work are not split apart from each other. And I suppose maybe to bring it back to fully automated luxury communism, what I would want that kind of automation to look like, and that relationship to the nonhuman to look like, would be to ensure that we're not dividing the conception of labour from its execution.

31:21 ROM DZIADKIEWICZ

Yeah. And coming back to the present or the future and asking about also the relation between research, theoretical approaches and practice. This is also what I want to ask you, because you as a journalist, as an editor, as a director, used to work in very practical way with the media, and now I think [you're in] a transition to theoretical activity.

32:10 CRAIG GENT

Yeah, that's fair.

32:10 ROM DZIADKIEWICZ

How do you feel also [about] your methodologies in this... That's all [a] field of practice-based research, working in the studio, also in the context of knowledge production. This is what I imagine is very important, and also this kind of gap that we have between people who assist technician skills and people who are in this humanistic or journalistic side?

32:50 CRAIG GENT

Yeah, it's an interesting question really because I suppose it gives me a moment of biographical reflection. I suppose I feel like I'm personally in a weird position, because so much of my journalistic work has never really been detached from the work of theorization, because I was always involved with the strategy and direction of Novara. And so although, of course, there would be these moments of being involved in things happening in the studio or the production of particular stories, it would also be the case that I'm constantly thinking about the kind of strategic, conceptual, questions as well. But over the last year or so, I've gone more into knowledge production, this book has come out, I've been talking about that and all this kind of stuff. And, of course, having had a short break from practice, it's making me want to re-engage with that again, but it has made me start thinking a lot about methods, and especially, of course, we've met through a shared interest in livestreaming. It's an irony that livestreaming is something that I was involved with in an organisational sense for a number of years, and yet I think like many people who use the technology I had a relatively shallow relationship to it conceptually, which might extend to a critique of the algorithm or whatever, all this stuff that we know, but not really thinking about what is the political

potency and potential of the technology, for example. That's the space where I'm at now. A lot of my work has been informed by historical methodologies of conceptual development around innovations, technological innovations in labour, such as workers inquiry, which was a big methodological part of Italian autonomism in the 60s and the 50s. And so today I'm thinking, okay, we have this situation where the new technology itself is the tracking and transmission of data, often in real time. It's not so far away from a livestreaming of something at the informational level. And what would it be like to think about either modes of workers inquiry and research, or, in fact, modes of resistance, that were also operating on this terrain. What does livestreaming mean for workers' resistance within highly automated work, for example? That's something I'm wrapping my head around at the minute. I don't have the answer. But I'm constantly thinking about it, and anytime I'm engaging with anything to do with livestreaming, whether it's artistic practice or aesthetic reflections, then this is always in the back of my mind.

36 : 32 ROM DZIADKIEWICZ

Yeah. It's these expanded meanings of streaming, of data circulation. Yeah, this is what we are part of. Ongoing processes, and also this tracking and the very meta level and very practice level that... Yeah, this is, I think, a huge, huge field waiting for investigational researchers. Also in a very practice way, to work with trackers maybe in these kind of studios also, and to think about how the logic of these relations and so on... Yeah. And also I think this is kind of a polygon, the lab for a new intersection between some fields of knowledge production. We are at the Academy of Fine Arts, the aesthetics of stream art are something that we explore, but [something that is] totally is a kind of meme from our daily activity here [is] that the department at the Academy that we have a really good relationship with is IT.

38:10 CRAIG GENT

Right! Oh wow.

38:12 ROM DZIADKIEWICZ

Because they totally understand what we are doing. And this is something that's sometimes open, like a reflection about maybe a movement to another kind of environment, university to work with, people who are more into IT studies and infrastructure studies than the aesthetics aspect. We can negotiate always, but it's more about a really strong mix of aspects around this data circulation.

39:05 CRAIG GENT

Yeah, one thing that's interesting to me is that in conversations I've had with members of the public in 'public forum'-type events over the last however many months, has been people wanting to talk about the role of, say, tech workers or tech designers, technologists, content designers, hardware designers, and the role that they could play in some kind of opposition to digital Taylorism, algorithmic management, something like that. It's really interesting, and it's hard to know what that looks like in practice, especially because, of course, those roles themselves are subject to a Taylorist logic of their own. I have friends who are workers, programmers for consultancies, and they don't really know what they're working on. You know, it's kind of like Severance. They're working on some collection of numbers or whatever, but they don't really know what the overall output is. They're given problems at the level of code to solve and to work out, and not really an overview. But I think it would be interesting to... I mean, maybe we need to get our hands on some industrial trackers and things and begin working with technologists to figure out for ourselves what a kind of

détournement of these technologies might look like. Because it's very clear to me from my research - I had conversations with lots and lots of people about their interactions with these technologies, and aside from the effect on the workflow and so on - it's very clear that there is a strongly aesthetic dimension to the relationship in practice between workers, who get euphemistically referred to as users, but, you know, workers and the technologies themselves.

41:40 ROM DZIADKIEWICZ

Yeah. And at the small scale, how do you find yourself in the StreamArtNetwork and some possibilities that we can create together? Also it could be maybe there last question before-

41:56 CRAIG GENT

Yeah, no, I think it's cool. Well my next ambition is to set up a studio in Leeds, is what I would like to do.

42:03 ROM DZIADKIEWICZ

Wow.

42:03 CRAIG GENT

Yeah. But I have to wrap my head around some of the technicalities.

42:10 ROM DZIADKIEWICZ

There are more people around that could be involved in that?

42:14 CRAIG GENT

Well, I figure you build it and they will come, you know? So, yeah, I think that would be a cool thing to explore. But I think whether that's a possibility or not, I do want to think about what the role of livestreaming might be within either workers' resistance or workers inquiry. And I don't yet know what that looks like, but I'm hoping that maybe by the summer, I can bring some people together to try to have that conversation, because I do feel like there's something there, and at the minute it feels like feeling around in the dark for it. But yeah, I think it's really interesting.

42:57 COMPUTER

We are submerged... caught in a furious... interfaces, hybrid...

42:57 ROM DZIADKIEWICZ

It is. And thank you for the conversation.

43:02 CRAIG GENT

It's a pleasure, it's so good to be here...

43:09 ROM DZIADKIEWICZ

We're in touch.

43:09 CRAIG GENT

...in this hybrid space with you.