

# **Network Communitarianism as a Tool for Stakeholder Engagement in Places:**

## **The case of Rog Factory**

The paper seeks to introduce the concept of Network Communitarianism as a way of approaching and appreciating participatory place making and stakeholder engagement with respect to place-specific decision making. It is argued that Network Communitarianism can offer a novel way of understanding how networks of place-makers interact and make place-informed decisions. This its turn can be picked up by the relevant policy makers as a tool for designing inclusive place-specific policies. Thus, Network Communitarianism as a tool for participatory place making and relevant policy design, can fit in the broader place management discourse and can therefore acquire not just theoretical but also practical and applicable dimensions. Hence, the present paper attempts to map out the theoretical framework for Network Communitarianism, apply it to a chosen case-study and conclude by making suggestions and recommendations for the future of the concept in an applied sense.

The concept of Network Communitarianism was developed relatively recently by Andrew Murray (2006) as a school of thought relating to the regulation of the internet. As such, it builds upon Actor Network Theory (Callon, 1999; Hetherington and Law, 2000; Latour, 2005; Law, 1992) and Social Systems Theory (Luhmann, 1986, 1995) and seeks to provide a bridge between the schools of cyber-libertarianism and cyber-paternalism that developed advocating either a *lessez-faire* or an over-protective approach to regulating cyber-space. Indeed, the regulation of cyberspace, especially among the first generation of scholars, provided ample opportunities to observe and study issues of regulation of a 'space' where laws did not seem to apply and to consequently question the nature of participatory involvement in the creation of spaces and in the communication between the users (participants) of those.

Andrew Murray's theory suggests that systems of networks created in cyber-space can be responsible for the regulation of this space they virtually occupy by engaging in space-specific practices. He observes how groups of networks operate both as actors in the network and as closed or Luhmannian social systems. According to Murray, communication between these groups of networks is key in understanding their engagement and the creation of norms that can in their turn, influence the way regulation happens. Thus, the systems become actors in the network able to affect change and create an environment whereby they not only actively participate but also by-pass any top-down regulatory attempts. Thus, Network Communitarianism can provide answers where traditional legal and social tools stop.

Borrowing from this innovative theory, this paper attempts to apply Network Communitarianism to place management as it is believed that it can help address participatory place making, and participatory decision making more specifically. By replacing Murray's 'space' with 'place', the paper seeks to re-configure Network Communitarianism as an inclusive process and also 'measure' its applicability by making use of a case study chosen specifically thanks to its uniqueness with respect to the networks that occupy it: this is the case of the Rog Factory urban squat within Ljubljana, Slovenia.

Indeed, Rog Factory has been operating for more than a decade in an abandoned factory in the city centre of Ljubljana. It is occupied by groups of artists, anarchists, activists, as well as more recently

refugees. Its past, present and future are contested by the authorities and by the representatives of the official municipality, who seek to evict the occupants and commercially develop the Factory area. The Factory and its future remain in limbo with both groups advocating their right to use of the space, which has been co-produced and co-created by its relevant stakeholders.

Aiming to bridge the gap in the communication and examine whether a viable solution for the future of Rog Factory can be in the cards, the paper suggests the employment of Murray's theory, since this theory was developed having the 'unregulated space' in mind. By observing how the networks that the relevant stakeholders from communicate and engage with each other, the paper also attempts to find common ground in the notion of putting the 'place' first and configuring the debate from a place-specific point of view. This way effective communication and potentially regulation can be possible if the nodes that enable communication between seemingly closed systems are examined, as per Murray. This paper suggests that in a place management context, the node that connects the systems is the place itself, through which all relevant information must pass. Thus, communication, regulation and decision making become not only place-specific but also stakeholder-specific and inclusive.

The use of Rog Factory as a case study can examine the viability of this theory that can then be further developed and applied in a broad place management narrative.

## References

- Callon M (1999) Actor-Network Theory? The Market Test. *The Sociological Review* 47(1\_suppl): 181–195.
- Hetherington K and Law J (2000) After Networks. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 18(2): 127–132.
- Latour B (2005) *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory*. Oxford: Clarendon.
- Law J (1992) Notes on the theory of the actor-network: Ordering, strategy, and heterogeneity. *Systems Practice* 5(4): 379–393.
- Luhmann N (1986) The Autopoiesis of Social Systems. In: Geyer F and Van der Zouwen J (eds), *Sociocybernetic Paradoxes*, London: Sage, pp. 172–192.
- Luhmann N (1995) *Social systems*. Stanford: CA: Stanford University Press.
- Murray A (2006) *The Regulation of Cyberspace: Control in the Online Environment*. London: Routledge-Cavendish.