

## **Rise and Decline of the Syndicate: the End of an Imagined Community**

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Preface 2004: The following text was written in November 2001 after the demise of the “Syndicate” Internet mailing list which had been in existence since 1996. The list connected people involved in media culture from all over Eastern and Western Europe and some non-European countries. The text offers both a description of the list and the “imagined community” it connected, and an analysis of how a successful list and networking project like the Syndicate could fail. Here we, as the mailing list’s administrators, present our personal perspective on the opportunities and the limitations of networking people online. The successor list project, “Spectre: list for media and culture in Deep Europe” has around 750 subscribers (May 2004) and a stable, low-noise flow of announcements and informational postings on media art and digital culture, mainly but not exclusively from Europe.

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The Syndicate mailing list imploded and went down in August 2001, destroying the lifeline of the Syndicate network. The network had been in a shaky situation for a while, due—we believe—to the destabilization of the precarious balance between the personal contacts of list members, the lurking and filtering-and-not-reading-let-alone-posting subscribers and a growing number of self-promoters who used the list as a personal performance space and disregarded the social rules of the online community.

Some people insisted on continuing the list on a new server, taking over the subscriber list, while we decided to form a new list, Spectre, which has been running on the previous Syndicate list-serve in Berlin since Aug 28, 2001. The list currently [as of November 2001] has 250 new subscribers and continues the tradition of the Syndicate list as a low-noise, open platform for exchange and cooperation in media culture in Europe.

After six years of successful work with and for the Syndicate community, the demise of the Syndicate list in August 2001 was a rather shocking experience for many of us, imposing on us the realization of how feeble such a community channel can be and how easily destroyed. It proved that responsibility and care are essential elements in a viable social online environment, and we had to learn the hard way that there is no consensus about the rules that should guide behaviour and interaction. The following text gives a brief summary from our personal perspective of the Syndicate initiative as it developed since its inception in 1996, and attempts an evaluation of its end.

Andreas Broeckmann started administering the Syndicate mailing list after its installation on the server of the Ars Electronica Center in Linz ([www.aec.at](http://www.aec.at)) in January 1996, helping people to subscribe, unsubscribe and post to the majordomo list. As the subscriber base grew from the original thirty subscribers to about 300 in 1998, Inke Arns joined in administering the list and—together with Arthur Bueno of

the V2\_Organisation in Rotterdam, who also maintained the Syndicate website and archive on [www.v2.nl/syndicate](http://www.v2.nl/syndicate) from 1998-2000—mostly managed the list administration through these years. We taught ourselves the basic majordomo commands, had our private mail accounts jammed with bounced messages, and therefore installed an admin account. Each time we would look into this account there would be hundreds of mails sitting there waiting for us ...but somehow it worked. Problems started appearing on an entirely different field.

With its completely open structure (technically and socially speaking) the Syndicate mailing list soon proved to be vulnerable. In the beginning of November 1998 the list was first targeted: all the subscribers were unsubscribed. Luckily we had been extracting the “who”-file on an almost daily basis and thus were able to reconstruct the list quickly. In September 2000 the list software on the server faced a serious crash that the sysops in Linz could not take care of because of the festival they were in at the time. So we decided to relocate the list onto a server to which we would have easier access for administration and configuration. Since then, the Syndicate list was hosted by an ISP in Berlin ([www.openoffice.de](http://www.openoffice.de)) which also soon gave us the opportunity to switch from Majordomo to the more easily administratable Mailman software.

But the Syndicate was much more than a piece of software: it was a network of people. The Syndicate was founded in January 1996 on the last day of the *Next 5 Minutes 2* Festival in Rotterdam. It was a network that devoted itself to fostering contacts and co-operation, improvements in communication and an exchange between institutions and individuals in Eastern and Western Europe active in the media and media culture. By allowing regular e-mail communication between participants regarding forthcoming events and collaborative projects, the Syndicate mailing list developed into an important channel and information resource for announcing and reporting new projects, events and developments in media culture. The complete mail archive is kept at <http://www.v2.nl/mail/v2east/>.

Since the first meeting in Rotterdam in 1996, which was attended by thirty media artists and activists, journalists and curators from twelve Eastern and Western European countries, the Syndicate network grew steadily. In August 2001, it linked over 500 members from more than thirty European and a number of non-European countries. The original idea was to establish an East-West network as well as an East-East network. In the meantime, however, the Syndicate had increasingly developed into an all-European forum for media culture and art. Over the last few years the division between East and West had been growing less important as people cooperated in ever-changing constellations, in ad-hoc as well as long-lasting partnerships.

Syndicate meetings and workshops had been held regularly, in most cases as part of festivals and conferences. The main meetings took place at half-yearly intervals in Rotterdam (Sept. 1996), Liverpool (April 1997), Kassel (July 1997), Dessau (Nov. 1997), Tirana (May 1998), Skopje (Oct. 1998), Budapest (April 1999; this meeting had been originally scheduled to take place in Belgrade, but had to be relocated due to the NATO bombings) and Helsinki (Oct. 1999), with many smaller meetings and joint projects, presentations and workshops happening in between. Hard copy *Syndicate Readers* edited by Inke and published on the occasion of some of the

meetings (Rotterdam 1996, Ostranenie Dessau 1997, Junction Skopje 1998) collected the most important texts from the mailing list in printed form.<sup>1</sup>

It was worth condensing Syndicate stuff in this way because most of the time the mail traffic was dominated by announcements. Attempts to turn the Syndicate list into a discussion list and to encourage people to send their personal reports, views and perceptions of what was happening were met by only limited response. In the beginning, when many people on the list still knew each other personally, this strategy was more successful, later, with the exploding rate of lurkers, less.

While in the first three years of its existence, the Syndicate held meetings quite regularly (almost every six months!), and organized panels and workshops with its members, since 1999 the Syndicate list came to be more like a sleeping beauty which in times of crisis would awake and show its full potential. Suddenly, when necessary, everybody was back on, communicating almost breathlessly with each other (“Have you heard about X?”—“The cultural centre Y was closed!”—“Z received his mobilisation call”.) The list was last activated in order to support Edi Muka, a Tirana-based long-time Syndicalist, who had been sacked from his post at the cultural centre Pyramid by some politically malevolent officials.

The meetings and personal contacts off-list were an essential part of the Syndicate network: they grounded the Syndicate in a network of friendly and working relationships, with strong ties and allegiances that spanned across Europe and made many collaborations between artists, initiatives and institutions possible. The Syndicate thus opened multiple channels between artists and cultural producers in Europe and beyond, which is probably its greatest achievement. It connected people and made them aware of each other's practices, creating multiple options for international collaborative projects.

A structure like that can work so long as it is supported and protected by a sufficient number of participants. It needs an ethical consensus about what is and what isn't possible on the list, which kinds of actions support and which may tilt the social equilibrium. The case of Andrej Tišma, a Yugoslav artist from multi-cultural Novi Sad and a defender of the Milosevic regime throughout the late 1990s, is a case in point: many perceived his tirades against the West and against NATO as pure Serbian propaganda which became unbearable at some point. Later, Tišma came back to the list and continued his criticisms by posting links to anti-NATO web pages he had created. For us, he was always an interesting signpost of Serb nationalist ideology that was good to be aware of. And it was good that he showed that people can be artists “like you and me,” and be Serb nationalists at the same time. The Syndicate could handle his presence after he agreed to tune down his rants.

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<sup>1</sup> Inke Arns and Andreas Broeckmann, eds., *Reader of the V2\_East / Syndicate Meeting on Documentation and Archives of Media Art in Eastern, Central and South-Eastern Europe* (Rotterdam: V2\_Organisation, 1996) <<http://colossus.v2.nl/syndicate/synr0.html>>; Inke Arns and Andreas Broeckmann eds., *Deep Europe: The 1996 - 97 edition. Selected texts from the V2\_East / Syndicate mailing list*, (Berlin, 1997) <<http://colossus.v2.nl/syndicate/synr1.html>>; Inke Arns, ed., *Junction Skopje, selected texts from the V2\_East/Syndicate mailing list 1997 – 98* (Skopje: Soros Center for Contemporary Art, 1998) <<http://colossus.v2.nl/syndicate/synr2.html>>.

However, this consensus was further eroded through the last two years. The nn episode on Syndicate in August 2001, then, was a symptom, but not the reason for the death of Syndicate. This started way before August 2001. Not only that there were no more meetings after 1999, one could also notice that since mid-1999 people felt less and less responsible for the list. Many Syndicalists of the first hour grew more silent (this was partly incited by the hefty discussions during the NATO bombings in Yugoslavia), perhaps more weary, perhaps less naive, many also changed their personal circumstances and got involved in other things (new jobs, new families, new countries). At the same time, the number of subscribers kept growing: more and more newbies kept flowing onto the Syndicate list.

The major change that occurred on the Syndicate around that time (1999) was the transition from a network of people and of trust, to a more and more anonymous mailing list, a list for announcements like so many others. A growing majority of Syndicate subscribers now tended to see the mailing list merely as a quick and handy tool for spreading self-promotion. The mailing list was to serve people's promotional goals, rather than serve as a tool of communication. When calls went out for support in the administration of the list, far too few people responded at all. Many people still did not understand the voluntary nature of the Syndicate initiative, and that the whole project depended on the sharing of work and responsibility. Too many people took the efforts of too few people for granted. Investing time and energy in the administration of such a list became more and more frustrating. When some fellow Syndicalists joined the admin team early 2001, we could have realized that the project had peaked and should have been transformed into something different altogether.

The net entity nn (Netochka Nezvanova, integer, antiorp, etc.), a pseudonym used by an international group of artists and programmers in their extensive and aggressive mailing list-based online-performances and for other art projects, had been subscribed to the Syndicate list in 1997. It was (as the first of less than a handful of people), unsubscribed against its will because it was spamming the list so heavily that all meaningful communication was blocked. In January 2001, nn sent an e-mail asking to again be subscribed to the Syndicate mailing list. (What nn never bothered to realize was that subscription to the list had always been open so that, at any point, it could have subscribed itself—we have always wondered why Majordomo is such a blind spot in this technophile entity's arsenal.) After getting assurances from nn that she was not out to misuse the list, we subscribed it to the Syndicate list.

Naively, as we came to realize. nn went from one or two messages every day in February to an average of three to five message in April and up to eight and ten messages per day in May and June—and that on a list which had a regular daily traffic of three to five messages a day. The distributed nature of the nn collective makes it possible for them to keep posting twenty-four hours a day—great for promoting your online presence, irritating for people who have a less frantic life rhythm. nn's messages are always cryptic, sometimes amusing, often tediously repetitive in their quirky rhetoric and style and generally irritating for the majority of people. Its activity on the Syndicate—like on many other lists it has used and terrorized—soon came to look like a hijack. But the sheer mass of traffic nn was generating, the sheer amount of nn's presence, was overwhelming. Perhaps this phenomenon could be compared to SMEGL, short for super mental gridlock, a term that was developed to describe traffic jam situations in NYC back in the eighties (or

was this term coined in Berlin-Kreuzberg's famous Fischbuero? Who knows, the boundaries get blurred...).

In the spring of 2001, nn's and other people's activities who use open, unmoderated mailing lists for promulgating their self-promotional e-mails, triggered discussions about "spam art," on Syndicate as well as on other lists. Actually, given the extreme openness and vulnerability of a structure like the Syndicate it remains quite astonishing that the list survived for such a long time. What happened in the course of 2000-2001 (not only to Syndicate, but also to several other mailing lists) was that the openness of these lists, i.e. the fact that they were unmoderated, was massively abused, and, finally, destroyed, by relentless "creative" spamming. One of the basic principles of the Internet—its openness—suddenly seemed to become a mere tool for attacking this very principle. "Netiquette" did not seem to be of much value anymore and was sacrificed for the egotistical self-expression of (distributed) artist egos. The irony of this process is that, like any good parasite, this artistic practice depends on the existence of lively online communities: it not only bites, but kills the hand that feeds it. These parasite nomads will find new hosts, no doubt, but they have over the past year helped to erode the social fabric of the wider net cultural population so much that communities have to protect themselves from attacks and hijacks more aggressively than before. Their adolescent carelessness is partly responsible for the withering of the romantic utopia of a completely open, sociable online environment. However educational that may be, we despise the deliberation with which these people act.

nn got unsubscribed from the Syndicate without warning on a day when there had been nothing but ten messages from her. After some days of silence and sighs of relief, angry protests by nn came through. On the list, accusations of censorship and/or dictatorship were made. A small but noisy faction denounced unsubscribing nn as an act against the freedom of speech. They called the administrators fascists, murderers, and "threatened" to report the case to "Index on Censorship". While some other list members welcomed the departure of nn on and off the list and the admin team again and again explained their move, the ludicrous allegations and vociferous insults continued.

The real shock for us was that the majority of list subscribers did not participate in the discussion and thus silently seemed to accept what was going on. It was personally hurtful not to receive more support against the insults raised against us, but more frustrating was the indifference that made the whole process possible. Within few days, the alienation from the atmosphere on the list was so great that we admitted defeat, re-subscribed nn and began to withdraw from the Syndicate. The list was moved to a different server and is now administered by other people at [www.anart.no/~syndicate](http://www.anart.no/~syndicate). We wanted to avoid further verbiage and conflict and therefore gave up the name, but we insist that from our perspective the Syndicate project that was founded in 1996 ended in August 2001. What remains under its name is a zombie kept alive by misconceptions about what the Syndicate really was. Maybe we should have stopped the project altogether in the summer?

Filtering has, in a way, done us in. Before there were effective e-mail clients that could filter out lists and other mail communication, everybody on the list got everything more or less instantly, which also meant a higher level of social awareness and social control of what goes on on the list. Today, many people filter

the lists they subscribe to and only look at the postings at irregular intervals—some mailboxes don't get opened for months. In this way, people consume the list passively and do not even notice a fiasco like the one that we experienced on the Syndicate list in the summer. I guess that some people who remain subscribed to the Syndicate list still have not noticed that anything has changed. For a social community, that kind of behaviour—automated deference—can be fatal.

### **"There's a spectre haunting Europe ..."**

In August 2001, after unsubscribing from the Syndicate, we initiated a new mailing list under the name "Spectre". It is an open, unmoderated list for media art and culture in Deep Europe. Spectre offers a channel for practical information exchange concerning events, projects and initiatives organized within the field of media culture and hosts discussions and critical commentary about the development of art, culture and politics in and beyond Europe. Deep Europe is not a particular territory, but is based on an attitude and experience of layered identities and histories—ubiquitous in Europe, yet in no way restricted by its topographical borders. (The term "Deep Europe" was coined by Anna Balint in 1996. It was passed on by Geert Lovink. It was used by Andreas Broeckmann and Inke Arns. It was interpreted by Luchezar Boyadjiev. It was used more by Sally Jane Norman, Iliyana Nedkova, Nina Czegledy, Edi Muka, and many others.)

Spectre is a channel for people involved in old and new media in art and culture. Importantly, many people on this list know each other personally. Spectre aims to facilitate real-life meetings and favours real face-to-face (screen-to-screen) cooperation, test-bed experiences and environments to provoke querying of issues of cultural identity/identification and difference (translatable as well as untranslatable or irreducible). The new list was immediately welcomed by many frustrated Syndicalists who quickly made the move.

Spectre is an unmoderated, but by not means open mailing list. With the Syndicate experience in mind we felt the need to explicitly formulate some basic, apparently no longer self-evident netiquette rules, like "meaningful discussions require mutual respect", and "self-advertise with care!". The list is initially hosted by the two of us, who also have to approve requests for subscription. The blurb explicitly reads: "Subscriptions may be terminated or suspended in the case of persistent violation of netiquette". We regret that we have to introduce such a system of control but see no other effective way of protecting something that is dear to us. A lack of sensible protection brought down the Syndicate. Information about Spectre is available at: <http://coredump.buug.de/cgi-bin/mailman/listinfo/spectre>.

We try to continue the good Syndicate tradition of amiable exchange and are more hesitant about the illusion of being an "online community". We maintain our romantic belief in lasting friendships and insist on the need to infuse networks with a strong sense of conviviality. We believe in people and their needs more than we believe in art.