



## TATIANA BAZZICHELLI

Photo by Felicia Scheurecker

Tatiana Bazzichelli is founder, board member, and programme director of the Disruption Network Lab. Her focus of work is hacktivism, network culture, art, and whistleblowing. A longer version of her biography can be found on page 10.

## LIEKE PLOEGER

Lieke Ploeger is the community director and administration officer of the Disruption Network Lab since 2019. She also serves as board member of the Disruption Network Lab e. V.. She is the co-founder of the independent project space SPEKTRUM art science community in Berlin, where she worked as community builder from 2014 to 2018. Her core interest lies in building and developing both online and offline communities of interest, with a focus on sharing knowledge and expertise in an open way. In 2018 she published the manual "How we can all make it to the future: A guide to offline community building in art & science" on the community building process of SPEKTRUM art science community. She previously worked for the Open Knowledge Foundation, a global non-profit organisation focused on realising open data's value to society by helping civil society groups access and use data to take action on social problems. She also worked for the National Library of the Netherlands. She has a double Master of Arts from the University of Utrecht, the Netherlands, and has been involved in various European research projects in the areas of open cultural data, open access and open science.

# CONCLUSION

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**TATIANA BAZZICHELLI &  
LIEKE PLOEGER**

## **BUILDING NETWORKS OF TRUST**

### **Before and After Blowing the Whistle**

**WHISTLEBLOWING** is an act of social justice that is often performed individually and in isolation from peers, but it cannot be fully understood without considering it as strictly embedded in social, political and cultural dynamics. The social structure of friends, advocates, supporters and colleagues becomes extremely crucial before and after blowing the whistle. It is a resource for whistleblowers and people working on whistleblowing that needs to be considered as central in order to be able to contain the pressure of whistleblowing and to give a sense of belonging to a larger community. Isolation is also one of the multiple facets of persecution towards whistleblowers, and it is the responsibility of all of us engaged with this subject to provide a context for sharing, discussion and mutual trust among different actors in this field. Furthermore, acts of whistleblowing are usually based on the witnessing of events that happen inside a specific sector, which implies relations with colleagues and other people, and therefore possible consequences for these colleagues, as well as society at large. Working in this field, either as an advocate, or as a curator, activist, journalist, filmmaker, writer, etc., requires establishing an intensely sharing and close relationship with the people that blew the whistle. Acts of whistleblowing are often made possible thanks to a mutual network of trust that gave the whistleblower the right courage. At the Disruption Network Lab, we believe that the organisation of our events on the topics of whistleblowing and social justice is only the final stage of a longer journey, one that is based on closer research and scrutiny of the given subjects, but also on the careful development of personal relationships with the invited speakers that share their stories with our audience. We consider what happens before and after our events

to be the central part of our work and the most relevant, because it is through the establishment of networks of trust that we can work collectively to provide literacy and, in the best cases, societal and cultural changes.

The core of our work is to connect people, and to offer them the opportunity to exchange perspectives from different fields of work and investigation. Since 2014, we organised participatory, interdisciplinary, international events at the intersection of human rights and technology with the objective of strengthening freedom of speech.

For each topic we analyse at the Disruption Network Lab, our central focus is to expose systems of power and injustice. How do we explain the systems of power related to a specific topic, and how can we find countermeasures to forms of injustice? Our approach is critical, stemming from within the subject, but also open to different expertise and to further investigation.

In our events, we seek to combine people and groups with different backgrounds and knowledge, and to create a network based on the analysis of multiple points of view. This chapter illustrates how the Disruption Network Lab works on building networks of trust through both the conference and community programme.

## **Disruption Network Lab: Sharing a Common Mindset for a Radical Change—Tatiana Bazzichelli**

In April 2014, drawing upon my previous experiences as curator, researcher, and networker in the field of art, hacking and activism, I decided to start a new project, which I called Disruption Network Lab. The initial idea was to bring together three areas of work: Disruption, as an interference of closed political and technological systems; Networking, as the creation of open contexts for sharing and social exchange; and the format of an experimental Laboratory for generating public awareness, investigating, and denouncing injustices. The main focus, learning from the experience of whistleblowers, truth-tellers, activists and hackers, was to identify hidden systems of power, and how to expose them. From 2015, our programme took shape through a series of conference events in Berlin at Studio 1 of Kunstquartier Bethanien, which is a lively space for artistic and cultural institutions of the city since the 1970s. To date, we are a team of eight people, but more colleagues in the past contributed to the development of our programme.<sup>1</sup>

In 2016, we became a registered Berlin-based nonprofit organisation in Germany (Disruption Network Lab e. V.), and since 2019, Lieke Ploeger joined me in the organisation as director of our Activation community programme. Since the foundation of the Lab, the scope was to introduce disruption as a multi-faceted concept, to research whistleblowing and truth-telling, and to understand how

whistleblowing could be seen as a source of inspiration for creating a difference in society. However, the Disruption Network Lab has not only been focusing on whistleblowing. The experimental approach in curating the programme involved a larger set of practices in connection with whistleblowing—as we have also seen throughout this anthology.

To better understand the notion and practice of whistleblowing, I proposed to link it with other topics, from social criticism, technological experimentation, to tactical media practices as a mix between art and activism. The purpose of the broad scope was to encourage a critical mindset shared by a variety of people, rather than only focusing on the presentation of specific facts.

Following my theoretical approach described in the introduction of this book, the Disruption Network Lab has made public the projects that disrupt the field of information technology in an unexpected way, in order to present interventions fostering political and social change. Since the early 2000s, my curatorial methodology has brought together a montage of methods and practices, as well as fieldworks, to create a network of experiences that can be understood in their full potential only if combined together. The first series of our conference events (April–December 2015) focused on media practices at the border of hacking, art and activism covering a wide spectrum of contemporary political, cultural and economic issues: from the use of drones in political conflicts, to the emergence of social media practices causing critical consequence on our privacy; from the critical reflection on gender, identity and sexuality in post-digital contexts, to the upcoming frontiers of bio-hacking; from the practice of whistleblowing as a way of exposing sensitive facts and information, to political stunts and tactics of disruption that reveal the bugs of economic and business systems from within.

Merging digital culture with other practices, e.g., hacking, activism, politics, sexuality, investigative journalism, whistleblowing, and popular culture, the aim is to create new forms of imagination, social awareness, and to provide literacy. This “montage method” (inspired by Walter Benjamin, 1928) is at the core of the conference events at the Disruption Network Lab, where different experts meet and collaboratively investigate the matters at hand. The event series unfolds a variety of issues through the years, which only appear to have no direct connection to each other. By keeping such thematic and practical connections open without necessarily reaching a curatorial synthesis, we invite the public to get inspired by the in-depth analysis of subjects that are often difficult to fully access.

In the framework of the Disruption Network Lab, the dialogue between disciplines is crucial for enabling the adoption of multiple points of view, and this approach is the basis for an experimental theoretical—and empirical—perspective. In the 1980s, James Clifford described the methodology of ethnographic surrealism as a means of dismantling culture's hierarchies and holistic truths. Cultural order had to be substituted with unusual juxtapositions, fragments and unex-

pected combinations, taking inspiration from Avant-garde practices of the 1920s and 30s. The goal of the ethnographic research was no longer seen as rendering the unfamiliar comprehensible as the previous tradition had required, but making the familiar strange “by a continuous play of the familiar and the strange, of which ethnography and surrealism are two elements” (Clifford, 1981).

This perspective of generating unusual juxtapositions and unexpected connections is applied within the event series of the Disruption Network Lab, by adopting a curatorial methodology that creates multiple contradictions without actually solving them. The idea is to keep the thematic frameworks open to new interpretations as a form of cultural criticism and as a way to experience crucial issues of society and politics from within.

This method, which works on the creation of networks of affinities as well as the interconnection of diverse subjectivities, becomes a mode of thinking about tactical strategies in the field of art, politics, and media. The methodology applied onto our curatorial series is to put the network configurations under investigation, and analyse their inner logics.

A comparative approach becomes of central importance, by creating a dialogue of practices in the field of whistleblowing, art, digital culture, politics and hacking. The goal is to encourage the creation of networks of trust, as a dialogue among the organisers and the speakers, among the participants of the programme and the audience, and among those and the broader scene of whistleblowing, media, art and technology in Berlin and internationally.

The creation of such conceptual and practical juxtapositions is often experienced as a surprise for our speakers, when for example whistleblowers are called to share ideas and methods with artists and activists. And more than once, we found ourselves in a situation where we needed to explain to either funders or the audience, who normally are confronted with programmes that deal with one specific field of expertise, how and why corporate wrongdoing, whistleblowing, the financial crisis, social hacking, and the critical reflection on identity and sexuality are connected.

This common effort results in the revealing and studying of the inner structures and logics of political, economic and technological systems, in order to encourage debate on sensitive issues, and to shed light on the hidden reasons of decision-making and their consequence on broader society.

Furthermore, at the Disruption Network Lab, we work on interconnecting various formats; on one hand we organise international conferences, both physical and digital events, and on the other hand, we organise local meetups and workshops through our community programme, as described later by Lieke Ploeger. So far, we realised more than twenty conference events<sup>2</sup>.

The first conference we organised was “Drones: Eyes From A Distance”, in April 2015, and our first keynote speaker was Brandon Bryant, a very important encoun-

ter for us. He describes his story by himself in the first chapter of this book, but nevertheless, I want to mention my personal experience in meeting him to explain the idea of building networks of trust more in depth. From 2006 to 2011 Brandon Bryant was a sensor operator of the drone programme in the US Air Force. After he left the programme, he tried to discuss and share what he experienced, making people understand that even if you were part of the military, you still had the possibility to create an impact by radically changing your point of view. He also showed how, as a drone operator, you could still experience forms of mental abuse that members of the military on the ground also go through.

Coming from an activist background, and witnessing events of police and paramilitary brutality in Italy as I described in my introduction of this book, I generally perceived the military forces as the enemy. Yet, when I met Brandon Bryant, and he shared with us his difficult experience of changing his opinion to open up a radical transformation in society, I understood that in that moment we shared an important mindset. I realised that both of us were seeking to investigate (almost hopelessly) powerful systems, trying to understand how to enact a change by exposing abuses and injustices. This was both shocking and revelatory for me, and it was a moment of deep reflection that informed a big part of the future programme I curated at the Disruption Network Lab, as well as a big part of my research on whistleblowing. The personal stories of all the whistleblowers that I met in the past years have been teaching me a different way of looking at my everyday life. Especially because the act of blowing the whistle—which is a radical gesture of changing opinion—is often followed by a consequent isolation and repression.

After blowing the whistle and deciding to leave the previous institutional structures, some whistleblowers gain quite a lot of popularity. But it is generally impossible to become completely free from a previous life, to avoid repercussions and persecution—as we also read in some contributions in this book. Whistleblowers are very important in that sense, in order to inform on abuses and wrongdoing, or to help people understand which forms of social and political control become pervasive without the public's knowledge. Establishing a network of trust is our responsibility not only as advocates, curators and organisers of a public programme, but also as members of a civic society.

Reading the stories of whistleblowers and speaking with them also teaches us the importance of a dialogical perspective, one that does not refuse those who appear to be very different from us because they come from opposing ideological backgrounds. In September 2018, I curated our conference “Infiltration: Challenging Supremacism”. We were trying to understand how we could challenge forms of White supremacy and right-wing ideology to better understand the Alt Right and the far-right phenomena. At the conference we invited speakers who were enacting disruption by infiltrating these groups—among them, anti-racist





Daryl Davis at the Disruption Network Lab conference *Infiltration: Challenging Supremacism*, September 7, 2018. Photo by Maria Silvano.

activist Patrik Hermansson, and terrorism and extremism researcher Julia Ebner. As usual in our programme, the goal was not to confront such systems from the outside, operating a frontal opposition, but reflecting on pervasive tactics of disruption, trying to understand how these systems worked and later turning the inner logic of these systems to our advantage, to dismantle their structures.

At this event, we invited as keynote speaker African-American R&B and blues musician Daryl Davis to share his impressive story, and the fact that he has befriended several members of the Ku Klux Klan (KKK) since the 1980s. Hearing his story of improving race relations by trying to change the Klan's members' mindsets and by having a dialogue with them was also revelatory for me, and made me understand that personal experiences and encounters with people from opposing backgrounds have a very strong potential for societal change, and once again, it made me understand that opposition alone isn't enough for effective criticism. Furthermore, it became clear that we need to give attention to the collective role of citizens in exposing the abuses of governments, institutions and corporations, as well as the work of practitioners to build up shared tools to facilitate this process.

During our conference “Citizens of Evidence: Independent Investigations for Change” in September 2019, we tried to understand how we could mobilise in a way that seeks to expose misconduct and wrongdoing more as a collective activity than as a single whistleblower. The objective was to work on the power of citizens and grassroots movements to expose facts, focusing on the ability of collective action to reveal wrongdoing, and the collaborative production of social justice.

Speakers like Matthew Caruana Galizia, Melissa Segura, Samuel Sinyangwe, Robert Trafford, Crina Boros, Emmanuel Freudenthal, Brennan Novak and M.C. McGrath, Wu Ming 1, Michael Hornsby, Laurie Treffers, to mention a few, experts operating between anticorruption, investigative journalism, data policy, political activism, open-source intelligence, story-telling, whistleblowing and truth-telling, shared community-based stories to increase awareness on sensitive subjects.

This event taught us that we need to work on different levels, highlighting both local and international stories, contributing to the creation of social change through grassroots investigations. The collective sharing and development of tools and tactics becomes crucial for this scope, as we can read in the following reflections by Lieke Ploeger, where she describes her work in developing our Activation community programme.

## **Activation: Community Building in the Fight Against Injustice—Lieke Ploeger**

An essential part of the work of the Disruption Network Lab focuses on creating space for different people and groups to connect to each other, share their knowledge and gain new skills. While from 2015 onwards this has happened through the main Disruption Network Lab conferences, as well as in smaller side events such as discussion nights, workshops or film screenings, since 2019 the Activation programme started adding regular community meetups and workshops to the conference stream. These provide space for Berlin-based initiatives and activists to interact with the conference topics and connect to each other, strengthening the community around the Disruption Network Lab.

Community building and creating networks among different groups is an ongoing and open-ended process, which is also for a major part shaped by the people involved in it. The way Tatiana Bazzichelli and I work on building networks of trust at the Disruption Network Lab, both within the conference and community programme, grew organically out of both our backgrounds, and is likely to continue to evolve in the future based on experiences along the way. You need both openness and flexibility to build up a sense of community, as well as to sustain it and help it grow. Reflecting on our current way of working with community, these



are some of the guiding principles, as well as the inspiration that made our working method at the Disruption Network Lab into what it is today.

First and foremost, I believe in the value of mixing different groups that would not otherwise meet. Before joining the Disruption Network Lab, I co-founded an art and community space in Berlin called SPEKTRUM art science community. In a former industrial bakery turned performance venue and bar, we experimented with bringing together a diverse mix of artists, hackers, scientists, activists, and makers in an atmosphere of creative and collaborative exchange and experimentation. We invited and stimulated people to use our space for meetups on week-nights, to share their knowledge openly, form collaborations and create artistic outputs together, which they in turn could show at performance nights and exhibitions at SPEKTRUM itself.

It was inspiring to see how fruitful such a mixture of crowds could be: over a period of four years many communities were established, ranging from the AAARTGAMES community interested in the use of games as audiovisual interactive art, to the XenoEntities Network focusing on intersections of queer, gender, and feminist studies with digital technologies. Out of one of the encounters between a researcher and a sound artist at SPEKTRUM, a cross-disciplinary research project called Sentire was established, which brings together artists, scientists, therapists, and developers to work on cognition and on human-technology interaction, particularly in relation to movement and sound.<sup>3</sup> After four years, we combined our learning from this community building process in a collectively written guide with tips and tricks.<sup>4</sup>

When bringing together different groups and people, the value lies not only in learning from each other's experiences and skills, but in a space opening up for something new. In permaculture, which is a nature-inspired approach to both agriculture and culture as a whole which aims to establish self-sufficient and sustainable (eco)systems, this is described as the 'edge effect'. Where two ecosystems overlap, for example at the edge of a forest, you can find a greater diversity of life: there will be species from each ecosystem there, but also unique species which can only be found in these transition zones.<sup>5</sup> Creating such transition zones for fresh inspiration and ideas is at the core of community building work.

With the community meetups and workshops we host at the Disruption Network Lab, we work to create such an environment where different groups can meet, present their work, interact with each other, and discover new points of connection. The interdisciplinary nature of these events follows that of the conferences, where we offer a platform for discussion for whistleblowers, human rights advocates, artists, hackers, journalists, lawyers and activists, as previously described. In the community events, we offer people an opportunity to connect in a more intimate setting, usually with up to 30 people, and to work in a hands-on format on the conference topic.

This can lead to fruitful points of contact: in connection to our “Evicted by Greed: Global Finance, Housing and Resistance” conference in May 2020, we connected local housing activist groups with the researcher Christoph Trautvetter, who works to collect data on housing ownership structures in Berlin. They are now in contact for future collaborations: his data can greatly enhance the activist work, and their local knowledge provides him in turn with more background information on which data could be relevant for their activism. Seeing such overlaps play out provides us inspiration for combining different fields of work into our events.

A second principle at the core of our work is to open up knowledge and allow it to be more widely used, especially to expose systems of power and injustice. Having previously worked for the Open Knowledge Foundation, a global non-profit organisation focused on realising open data's value to society, I am especially keen on finding ways to give people more skills to understand how to work with data and technology. Open data can often help give insight into problems that our conferences address: data on company ownership can for example shed light on corruption cases.

Our meetups and workshops are open to anyone who wants to join, and we undertake effort to advertise and promote the event in a way that it is accessible for everyone, not just experts on the topic. What unites our audience, speakers and team is a critical and investigative attitude towards political, economic and technological developments in society, and a belief that we can contribute to exposing, as well as improving, these in the future. We want our audience to leave with a feeling that alternative ways of intervening in society are possible and accessible for everyone interested in joining.

Openness is important for the event formats as well: though we often host discussion nights or workshops, we develop each event together with the specific community involved, and are open to experiment with different set-ups. For one of the meetups connected to our “Borders of Fear: Migration, Security and Control” conference in November 2020, we worked with the Migrant Media Network to develop the immersive journey “Facing Invisible Borders”. In the meetup, the participants took on the fictional identity of a migrant and had to go through the process of applying for a visa through a visa office set up in the meeting space, with members of the Migrant Media Network playing the role of visa officers conducting the interviews. The design thinking method used for this immersive and playful journey greatly helped make people understand the process of applying for a visa coming from a developing country, brought up food for discussion afterwards, and made the invisible border visible.

Then there is of course the interpersonal dimension. One of the most rewarding aspects of community work is when you are able to create contexts of sharing, and stimulate ongoing connections between individuals. With our regular meet-

ups we now offer our network more opportunities to connect throughout the year, but this also gives us new energy and insights each time we meet with the people interested in our conference topics. We see people returning to our events: while starting up the discussion around a topic at one of the meetups, we continue and deepen the conversation with our audience during the main conference. It has also happened that we met people at a meetup, got to know their work, and then invited them to speak at one of our conferences where their work intersected with our topic. This all contributes to a sense of community.

Last, but definitely not least, there is what I would call unexpected benefits of community work. You never know exactly what will come out of the shared space that is created, and some connections may surprise you. Connected to the previously mentioned “Citizens of Evidence” conference, we hosted two community workshops. Danja Vasiliev and Sarah Grant, part of the Radical Networks conference organising team, taught people how to set up a self-hosted secure file sharing system, using a Raspberry Pi as a web server and wireless access point combined with a self-hosted installation of the open-source NextCloud software. In the other workshop, Hadi Al Khatib of the Syrian Archive explained their workflow for collecting and verifying information about human rights violations through video material, and taught participants specific OSINT skills such as geolocation techniques. Interestingly, the secure file sharing system as explained in the first workshop would be a valuable tool for exchanging the type of video content that the Syrian Archive uses for their work, where content is often taken down by social media platforms such as YouTube. It is exciting to see such connections between groups and communities occur as a result of our community events, and exactly the type of networking that we hope we can encourage more of.

Taking time to build up community around your work and get to know the networks surrounding your fields brings more benefits than can be imagined when you plan for it. This is the essence of the community work for the Disruption Network Lab, creating an atmosphere on the edges of where different ecosystems meet, and being open to what arises.

This is also the essence of building networks of trust, a central premise for this book.

We are open to experience what arises from this common journey.

## Notes

1. The profiles of the present and past Disruption Network Lab team members are visible at: <https://www.disruptionlab.org/team>.
2. The full list and content details of the conference programme by the Disruption Network Lab is visible at: <https://www.disruptionlab.org/conferences>. The full list of the meetup events is visible at: <https://www.disruptionlab.org/meet-ups>. Additionally, since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, we have been hosting regular online dialogues happening every Friday (Disruptive Fridays) since April 2020, visible at: <https://www.disruptionlab.org/fridays>.
3. *Sentire*, <https://sentire.me>.
4. Lieke Ploeger, with contributions by Michael Ang, Valeria Barvinska, Troy Duguid, Claire Fristot, Arthur Gib, Magdalena Klein, Felix Klee, Olga Kozmanidze, Merle Leufgen, Byrke Lou and Vladimir Storm, "How we can all make it to the future: A guide to offline community building in art & science". *Re-Imagine Europe* report, October 2018, <https://tinyurl.com/spektrumberlin>.
5. "Permaculture Design Principle 10 – Edge Effect", *Deep Green Permaculture*, accessed August 17, 2021 <https://deepgreenpermaculture.com/permaculture/permaculture-design-principles/10-edge-effect/>.