

## **A Brief History of the Neural Magazine Project**

Alessandro Ludovico

Neural [1] is a media culture magazine funded in Bari, Italy in late 1993. To understand its roots we have to consider that then, in Italy there were three important phenomena rising. The first was the Italian so-called 'cyberpunk' political movement. This movement was started by various collectives and small publishers who understood the importance of the social and political digital issues, struggling to keep the local cyberspace a land of free speech and expression. The second was the Italian electronic music scene, that grew up fast, influenced by the new Detroit acid techno and using PCs and samplers in bedrooms to produce new music tracks. And the third was the Bulletin Board Systems (BBS) scene that created large internationally connected communities excited to share for the first time with the rest of the world valuable opinions and computer files. In 1991 I was working as a graphic designer for Minus Habens Records, an underground electronic music label in Bari, and we published an early slim printed guide to virtual reality: the 'Virtual Reality Handbook'<sup>2</sup>, coming with an inspired music cd. It was a quite successful product which was sold out in less than a year. Then I decided to fund, together with the Minus Habens owner, a magazine about the cultural implications of new technologies. So we founded Neural, and we were able to print the first issue in November 1993 (just five months after the first Wired issue, without previously knowing about Wired)<sup>3</sup>. We covered the above topics (cyberpunk and politics, electronic music and BBS networks) plus art and science fiction, but we also tried to give them a proper visual frame. We cared a lot about design and how it could have expressed the electronic culture in a sort of printed 'interface'. So, for example, the page numbering was strictly in binary numbers, just zeroes and ones, even if the printer started to complain that this was driving him crazy. Only after three years we started adding decimal numbering on the side of the binary ones, in order to don't hurt the new printer.

Another sensorial experience we tried to implement since the beginning was placed on the centrefold. We referred to optical art works and theories to give readers a dynamic mind trip while reading. In issue 184 we definitively interrupted this habit, publishing a disrupting hacktivist fake. It was a double page of fake stickers, created by the Italian hacker laboratories' network<sup>5</sup>. These fake stickers were sarcastically simulating the real ones that are mandatory stucked on any book or compact disc sold in Italy, because of the strict law supporting the national Author's and Musicians' Society (SIAE). On the one published on Neural it was written: "suggested duplication on any media." In 1998 we restyled the layout and restructured the contents, defining three sections we really wanted to be involved to. They still are: hacktivism that means activism and artivism using electronic media to express itself, electronic music, investigating how the technology is involved in production and consumption of sounds and how sound artists interpret it, and media art, with a peculiar attention to the networked and conceptual use of technology in art. The cyberpunk movement in Italy has become the hacktivist movement, and there were various and important examples: among the others the invention and practical application in 1995 of the 'netstrike'<sup>6</sup>, a virtual sit-in trying to block a server just massively reloading its home page. Then, since 1998, the organization of the annual national "hackmeeting," that gather thousands of hackers from all

over the country in a totally self-organized and sponsor-free environment. The hackmeeting is a three days event of high level conferences and personal meetings. And there were many others valuable initiatives in the Italian hacktivist scene. For example, the struggle for the use of free software in the public administration, computer education that would reduce the digital divide of African, East European, and Asian immigrants, independent publishers and musicians' meetings debating the copyright/copyleft dilemma, unions of fired and temp new economy workers, gender and technology relationships, the micro-broadcasting movement of the so-called telestreet, and so on. On the other end, media art was learning the network lesson, blowing up the white box concept and facing its computer-related instability. Furthermore, the networks enabled collaborations that clearly showed how is not really important where you live, but what ideas you're able to develop. The same was happening on music, with fresh talents playing with their ideas through software and hardware inventions. The local and global electronic music scene boomed and now there's too much production than one can reasonably hear. Neural receives an average of a couple of new electronic music CD every week, submitted for review. In 2003 we started an edition in English language. Actually, Neural is printed every four months and distributed in Europe, United States, Japan, Korea, Australia, and New Zealand with subscribers from all over the world. The Neural website went online in 1997, and it was updated every two weeks. Since November 2000, it was daily updated. Some figures: the web site hosts a bit less than 5000 pages and more than 10000 web sites link back to Neural.it. Some people tell us that they think of Neural as a work of art. We don't know whether it really is, but sometimes I think of it as an infogallery, the best info-gallery I'd want to read, and nonetheless a curated narrative of the new media culture's evolution, formed by important chunks of information condensed in a limited space. We still don't know whether it's a work of art, but actually the English version of the website won an Honorary Mention in Prix Ars Electronica 2004 (in the Net.Vision category)<sup>7</sup>. Furthermore, readers' feedback is precious, helping us in understanding new needs and trends. So the magazine's editorial line is changed (even slightly) every issue, and the same happens to the website. Neural is meant to serve an existing community, with the most idealistic journalistic approach: connecting info and ideas to let people find inspiration in order to develop their own project, confronting with others, in a sort of info-node, free for all. Neural it's still a not for profit project and the whole online content is published under a Creative Commons license. Many collaborations started with other entities, so we actively also support or co-organize external projects, as in 1995 when we supported the publication of "Internet Underground Guide"<sup>8</sup>, a guide to the most obscure parts of the global network, with a music compilation assembled only via the electronic mail medium. In 1996 we provided content and consulting for one of the first new media art exhibition of Italian artists: "Virtual Light"<sup>9</sup>. In 2000 we provided a substantial Neural content was used for the publication of the book "Suoni Futuri Digitali" (Future Digital Sounds)<sup>10</sup>. In 2001 we organized the conference "Liberating Technologies" in Bari, with the participation of the Italian rasta-coder Jaromil and the Italian philosopher Franco 'Bifo' Berardi<sup>11</sup>. In May 2002, in Seville (Spain), we founded, after a few days of discussions, the "Mag.net, electronic cultural publishers" network<sup>12</sup>. Its founding members were Simon Worthington (Mute, London); Mercedes Bunz and

Sascha Kösch (both De:Bug, Berlin); Fran Ilich (Undo, Mexico); Alessandro Ludovico (Neural, Bari); Georg Schöllhammer (Springerin, Vienna); Ieva Auzina (RIXC and Acoustic Space, Riga); Slavo Krekovic (3/4 Revue, Bratislava); Kristian Lukic (KUDA Media Center, Novi Sad); Vladan Sir (Umelec, Prague); Joanne Richardson (Subsol and Balkon, Romania); Carme Ortiz and Mar Villaespesa (Think Publishing, Spain); Miren Eraso (Zehar, San Sebastian, and Think Publishing); Claudia Castelo (Flirt, Lisbon); Malcolm Dickson (Streetlevel and Variant, Glasgow, UK); Pedro Jimenez (Cafeína, Sevilla); Julian Ruesga (Parabólica, Sevilla) [The Mag.net Reader, experiences in electronic cultural publishing]. What was accomplished was a great sharing of knowledge and the publication of three readers (in 2005, 2006, and 2007)<sup>13</sup> about the relationships between offline and online publishing, with the slogan: “Collaboration is better than competition.” An indirect outcome, curated by Georg Schöllhammer was also the “Documenta XII, Magazine Project”<sup>14</sup> held in Kassel in 2007, an exhibition and series of debates involving almost one hundred independent art magazines from all over the world, with even an embryonic editorial collaborative online platform. In summer 2008 the printed magazine was re-designed, and in 2009-2011 a research funded by the Piet Zwart/Willem De Kooning Academy in Rotterdam has been printed in a book titled “Post-Digital Print, the mutation of Publishing since 1894,” about the history, the art, and the essence of the printed media just before the invasion of digital media trying to totally replace it. Finally, in the same years there’s the development of the “Neural Archive” an online database with all data about the publications received by Neural during the years, forming the embryo of a “distributed archive.” I would like to end with some general considerations: one of the main characteristics of digital culture is spreading fast powerful ideas. A good technical hack, as an innovative sound use, or an original concept showed in a proper digital artwork, are meaningful signals. These signals are ideas, which have to be shared among the worldwide interested community, for a participative development. The aim of Neural is to exchange meaningful ideas concerned to local and international groups of people. This is our primary purpose. So we’re interested in ideas, theories, and striking practices that break conventions and keep people thinking on what they’re doing locally or globally: one of the resulting values of the magazine is to reporting those who “think globally and act locally.” Furthermore, the sensible grow of the community has sensibly changed the editor/reader relationship. The potential collaborators want to appear on the printed paper, even if their work will be read by far less people than if it’d appear online. But, this is probably because printed paper is probably the last organic medium in the post-media era. It represents the luxury of static design and in the common sense the safety that your work will not be switched off or deleted.

## Notes

[1] [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Neural\\_magazine](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Neural_magazine)

2. <http://www.minushabens.com/MHCD014.html>

3. <https://web.archive.org/web/20120523131345/http://www.neural.it/n/n1.htm>

4. <https://web.archive.org/web/20060101073824/http://www.neural.it/n/n18.htm>

5. <http://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hacklab>

6. <http://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/Netstrike>
7. [http://90.146.8.18/en/archives/picture\\_ausgabe\\_02\\_new.asp?iAreaID=111&showAreaID=157&page=6&pagesize=5&order=jahr](http://90.146.8.18/en/archives/picture_ausgabe_02_new.asp?iAreaID=111&showAreaID=157&page=6&pagesize=5&order=jahr)
8. <http://www.minushabens.com/MHCD028.html>
9. <http://www.neural.it/projects/virtual/vlight.html>
10. <http://www.neural.it/projects/sfd/>
11. <http://www.neural.it/tdl/>
12. <http://magnet-ecp.org/>
13. <http://www.labforculture.org/en/content/view/full/35568>
14. [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Documenta\\_12\\_magazines](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Documenta_12_magazines)