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## **The Flexibility of Internet Time**

### **Network Society and the Fleeting Stability of Sociotechnical Collectives**

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Every search for an authoritative standard time shows how much time depends on a stable order of social practices and technological conditions. The introduction of a uniform world-time in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century was preceded by political, scientific, and economic struggles for an authoritative model of a temporal order. Only if social practices and technological conditions are met, can time limit the different local times around the world in their scope, assign clearly defined boundaries of time zones, lead to a standardized reference system, and thus make time predictable in its difference. That the division of the globe into time zones, with 15° steps each demarcating the interval of one hour, follows the division into longitudes, and that the prime meridian marking the world time runs through British Greenwich, is due to historical conventions of world-wide maritime navigation, which has long used the Royal Observatory as a basis for measurement. There is little astronomical benefit or any other scientifically plausible reason for privileging Greenwich. Any other longitude – designated as such by other practices – could have been the zero meridian and thus have caused conventions of the order of time different from those established at the International Meridian Conference in 1884 under the hegemony of the British Empire (Blaise 2002, 94; Bartky 2007, 4).

To conclude from the order and measurement of time a strictly »social nature of time« and to declare it a product of collective experience that distances the human events from natural rhythms (Lee and Liebenau 2000, 45–47), would, however, be far too simple. Without denying the relevance of clock times, calendars, and standard times, the sociologist Barbara Adam demands a »time-sensitive social science« (Adam 1995, 10) that contributes to the complexity of diverse temporalities of the everyday. Personal memories, anticipations, experiences of travel time during the rapid traversing of time zones in airplanes, technological processes, and new media of communication, weather, and environmental conditions shape the everyday experience of time as well as schedules and clocks. Adam suggests that »a multitude of times which interpenetrate and permeate our daily

lives« (Adam 1995, 12) should therefore be included in the analysis of social time. The constellations of multiple temporalities described by Adam around 2000 already characterized the invention of the world time in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. Telegraphy, railroads, ships, that is, new media technologies, modern transportation, human experiences with time, environmentally related local times, and last but not least, the confusion of passengers when crossing non-standard time zones, called for the need of a standard time and outlasted their implementation. It seems that time can neither be separated from technological conditions nor from locally defined times that were and are shaped by natural rhythms of daily routines. Time can consequently not entirely be transferred into the social conventions of a uniform applicable standard measurement of time.

Due to the conditions of ubiquitous digital technologies, this complexity of time has intensified and it has become even more obvious that time in its diversity can never be completely subsumed by cultural techniques of synchronization (Kassung and Macho 2013) and social conventions of a time order or that time would be available to a given social order in its entirety. Under the terms of the digital we are confronted with the entanglement of everyday practices and media technologies, with the increasing interpenetration of human and technical ›Eigenzeiten‹ (Nowotny 1993; Hansen 2011; Hayles 2011), which are inaccessible to a human sensual experience. Under these terms yet another factor has become obvious: Not only the multiplicity of time acts contrary to constantly stable time structures – and thus stable social order – confounding standardized times and schedules. Each sociotechnical collective<sup>1</sup>, even if it agrees to a binding time order, does have its own temporality since it continually produces transformations. Its own processuality is part of the multiplicity of time. Each time order has thus changing starting and reference points. The social fabric out of which time orders emerge and that is targeted in a stabilizing way by this order, is in itself unstable, because it is constantly changing with the changing conditions of its media-technological environments. This relational transformation of collectives and entities (human and technical objects) that are part of this transformation, and the technologically driven environments, can according to Gilbert Simondon be described as a process of ›collective individuation‹. Sociotechnical collectives have from this perspective no stable identity. Rather they run through phases of a continuous transformation of metastable states that are enriched with potentialities and that are preceding a restructuring (Simondon 1993; De Boever et al. 2013).

Following this notion of continuously changing sociotechnical collectives, I would like to ask about the *idioms of stability and destabilization* in the socio-technical analysis of time, in the attempt of time standardization, and in practices

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1 | I am using the term sociotechnical collective following the actor-network theory, to indicate that a social structure consists not only of people but also of non-human actors (technical objects, discourses, practices; Latour 2005).

of temporality. My inquiry relates to a media constellation, which in the recent past has brought the supposedly stabilized ratio of universal time and local times again into the process: the expansion of the Internet and the therewith associated possibility to communicate ›in real time‹ across all time zones. Already the computer was meant to bring about a completely new abstract temporality, which in its historical significance would be comparable to the introduction of the clock (Rifkin 1987, 13). More radical for the restructuring of sociotechnical collectives and their temporal standardization and synchronization, is, however, the temporality of digital networking, the Internet time (Hassan and Purser 2007).

To examine the relationship between time structures of the Internet and meta-stable or only temporarily stabilized sociotechnical collectives, this contribution first explores the descriptions of the network time, which dangers and promises are especially linked to its destabilizing or liberating repeal of previous time regimes such as clock time. Predominant in the next step is the failed attempt of introducing a new stable standardized Internet time, independent of local times, namely the Swatch Internet time. The last part of the contribution addresses – by drawing on examples from Twitter communication – the significance of differing, but flexible time zones, as they are constructed currently in discourses and practices of online communities. The contribution wants to show that the dichotomy of stability and destabilization, which marks the indication of a ›timeless time‹ just like the construction of a uniform Internet time, is faced with the transition to flexible time orders in online practices, which are yet another possibility to determine and share a common, identity producing temporality of sociotechnical collectives.

## 1. NETWORK TIME AND SOCIAL ANALYSIS

The diagnosis of the present as being marked by a multiplicity of time in which every time concept is itself included in the sense of a ›timing of time‹ (Stalder 2006, 156) because it can only be designed within a given temporal grid, can at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century not only be found in Adam's investigations, but also in many sociological (Urry 2003) and philosophical (Sandbothe 1998) studies. Castells certainly does not contradict this diagnosis in his monumental theory of the network society, ›The Information Age‹ (Castells 1996–1998). On the contrary, the multiplicity of time is also a central feature of the time of the ›information age‹ and its ›space of flows‹ stretched by media exchange processes and capitalist commodity flow. According to Castells, because of increasingly rapid exchange of information and goods, as well as rapidly increasing travel speeds, this space is not only affected by space-time compression (Harvey 1990), real time (Virilio 1994) or simultaneity (Castells [1996] 2000, 491), but also by a mixture to differing times. Castells does not assume a disparate juxtaposition, but rather assumes a synchronized mixture of differing times in which time extinguishes itself.

»[T]he mixing of time in the media, within the same channel of communication and at the choice of the viewer/interactor, creates a temporal collage, where not only genres are mixed, but their timing becomes synchronous in a flat horizon, with no beginning, no end, and no sequence. The timelessness of multimedia's hypertext is a decisive feature of our culture, shaping the minds and memories of children educated in the new cultural context« (Castells [1996] 2000, 492).

The time of the network society characterized by the temporal processes of their communication media, is thus marked as not sequenced and therefore as ›timeless‹ time. Castells here is cautionary towards the concept of a multiple time, which had been invested with much enthusiasm in the pioneering phase of the Internet in the 1990s: the idea that network time would eliminate the regime of clock time and thus the dominant order of the social time of the industrial age (Mumford 1934; Thomson 1967), that had been sealed with the introduction of standard time and the division of the world into time zones (Hassan 2001, 40). In an almost euphoric manner, Pierre Lévy argues for this thesis in his visionary work *L'intelligence collective* of 1994. Lévy celebrates the liberation from the clock time and other conventions and standardization of time as an almost *coming into its own* of the multiple times into a new ›inner time‹ of the cyberspace. Lévy follows here – like many affirmative analysts of the network time – the concepts of Henri Bergson and Edmund Husserl who opposed measurable, spatialized time with an inner experience of time (Hassan and Purser 2007, 6). The complexity of subjectively experienced ›internal times‹ can according to Lévy only fully unfold within a ›knowledge space‹ of the networked community that left behind every capitalistic use – as attributed by Castells to the ›space of flows‹ – and thus left behind any economies of real time, because here it can develop into a transsubjective divisible time. Lévy counters the always increasing high speed of flexible capitalism with the hope for a slowing down:

»The knowledge space abolishes deferral, but not in accordance with the modes of commodity space, by accelerating to real time, because real time is still indexed to the clock, to an external time. The knowledge space annuls deferral by changing the reference system: It is nourished on internal time. Rapid, intense durations, entirely contained in vitality, the calmness, the tranquility of collective maturity. Such velocity, such slowness, has no relationship to the clock or calendar. It refers only to itself. It is a quality of being. In the knowledge space, time flows from a variety of living sources that blend together. Different times bubble up and call to one another like musical rhythms« (Lévy [1994] 1997, 180).

This argument has been utilized in a similar form beyond the visionary descriptions of cyberspace. Robert Hassan has, in contrast to Castells ›timeless time‹, characterized network time as »[c]onnected asynchronicity« (Hassan 2007, 51), which again restores the value of a temporal multiplicity, after it has been displaced by

clock time.<sup>2</sup> The network society, Hassan states, is characterized by a juxtaposition of numerous asynchronous spaces in which people, socio-economic processes, and technologies produce and form their own times according to their different contexts (Hassan 2007, 51f). The result is a disparity and fragmentation of multiple times: the local time of the user faces the system time of the computer, the real time of chats is confronted by the waiting times of email communication, and the loading time of a page to that of the Web browser (Weinberger 2002, 57–69). Comparable with Lévy's utopia, the unified figuration of a network time is designed here as time that can as a virtual time escape the ›artificial‹ time regime of clock time: ›Information networks, of course, act as another form of artificial temporality. Through them humans now create a virtual time and space. Networks may be seen as a kind of temporal ecology outside the centripetal force of clock time« (Hassan and Purser 2007, 10).

What Lévy welcomes for a coming cyberspace society and Hassan diagnoses for the digitally networked society, namely a society that has freed itself from the shackles of the normalized and normalizing clock face to be more democratic and more creative, is, however, determined by Castells in his analysis of the present as a loss of social order. He presupposes a very specific notion of time, which is the exact opposite of the conception of an internally experienced time. The possibility that beyond the ›space of flows‹ there is an inner temporality of collective intelligence, is therefore unthinkable for Castells: Following Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, Castells defines time as a succession of things, as ›order of succession« (Castells [1996], 2000, 494) and thus as a structuring, spatialized principle (Stalder 2006, 155). He finds time as succession in biological, cosmological, and physical processes, thus the central starting point in Castells argument is in the fact that succession characterizes the historically changing order of events and thus the social character of time. The thus understood social time clusters the multiple temporalities as a dominant time model (Stalder 2006, 55) – just like the linear clock time in the industrial age or cyclical time in the Middle Ages. It is precisely this ability of the sequential order that is lost to the prevailing social time of the network society – the ›timeless time‹. This ability is lost when the ›space of flows‹ becomes independent and detaches itself from the local times of the ›space of places,‹<sup>3</sup> which

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2 | ›What digital networks make possible is the conscious creation of temporal contexts and the freeing of the embedded times in humans, in nature, and in society that form the timescapes that intersect our lives but that we have been unable to fully experience, appreciate, or understand because of the deadening implacability of clock time« (Hassan 2007, 51).

3 | Whereby both the spaces in their temporal constitution remain in coexistence: ›Timeless time belongs to the space of flows, while time discipline, biological time, and socially determined sequencing characterize places around the world, materially structuring and deconstructing our segmented societies. Space shapes time in our society, thus reversing an historical trend: flows induce timeless time, places are time-bounded« (Castells [1996] 2000, 495).

are still based on the standardization of the 19<sup>th</sup> century time zones: »This linear, irreversible, measurable, predictable time is being shattered in the network society, in a movement of extraordinary historical significance« (Castells [1996] 2000, 465).

Especially the heterarchical coexistence of the different times that surface like »time bubbles« in the network time described by Lévy, is depicted by Castells in his analytical probing of society as a state of disorder in which the fragmented individual times exactly do not relate in a dialogically successive manner like musical rhythms. Castells analyzes a society that is out of step: with the flexibility of schedules, daily operations, and life cycles – a circumstance that affects all working and life areas up to repealing biological rhythms and a denial of death by medical progress. The consequence is an indifferent time that Castells simultaneously identifies as »eternal« and »ephemeral«. According to Castells the reason for this is, first, that each sequential succession and thus any anteriority and posteriority is abolished in favor of an eternal concurrency, and, secondly, that only short-term, culturally meaningful sequences evolve – fleeting and dependent on context (Castells [1996] 2000, 492). Thus, the core findings of Castells' social analysis are that the temporal flexibility in computer networks, capitalist work processes, and life forms lead to a loss of reliable rhythms, to a time without sequence and thus timeless time. This results in a constantly destabilizing society, whose temporal mixture prevents that a time – and with that a social – order can prevail.

The social analysis of the network time does, however, contain presuppositions that are not elucidated in Castells representation. Felix Stalder rightfully points out that the paradoxical »timeless time«, which, as the dominating time of the network society, just cannot dominate the multiple individual times, is merely a placeholder that Castells employs instead of a detailed theoretical or empirical clarification. (Stalder 2006, 157, 161) It is by no means evident that only under the conditions of networked technologies and flows of goods a social time can constitute itself without a consistent temporal ordering system. In Armin Nassehi's systemtheoretical description, this characterizes modern society since its functional differentiation. Although a binding global or clock time is an expression of a system time of society, it only functions as a technical basis for the observation and thus differentiation of separate and not fused times (Nassehi 2008, 317).

This results in a second aspect that is unquestionably presupposed not only in Castells' idea of a »mixing of times«, but also in Lévy's view as the surging up of different times that »call to one another like musical rhythms«, or Hassan's »connected asynchronicity«. It is the idea that different times combine in the network time smoothly and trouble-free to a common (inner, timeless or asynchronous networked) time, without the necessity of a synchronization or problems of coordination – and that regardless of whether the mixture of time is intended posi-

ve or negative.<sup>4</sup> Neither Castells' diagnosis, nor the euphoric designs of network time thus point toward a problem that is characterized by Nassehi as central to the temporality of modern society. Specifically, this is the need for a synchronization of simultaneous, but differing times (Nassehi 2008, 307) that are always associated with complex processes and impositions of ›understanding‹ each other. This is especially true when technical actors are involved in social aspects (to an extent that cannot be ignored), and the times to be adjusted multiply further.

The idiomatic expressions or ways of thinking that underlie the description of network time can be seen in a basic, ›cleaning‹ separation process. No matter whether the descriptions of the network time refer to ›space of flows‹, ›cyber-space‹, or ›digital networks‹, what is envisioned is a temporal habitat or refuge that operates according to laws that differ from those temporalities, which exist outside of the networks. Based on the separation process it is determined what can be regarded as a stable temporal order of a social fabric and where processes of destabilization can be identified – either by excessive flexibilization or by excessive solidification of preexisting orders. The ›time mix‹ as a central feature of the network time can in this separation process on the one hand operate as a loss of order, on the other hand as a gain of a new order more appropriate to the subtle human perception of time. The separation process in the descriptions of the network time, its detachment of everything it supposedly is not (natural time, clock time, local time) avoids the need for synchronization in two ways: Firstly, its own logic makes a synchronization with the temporalities it does not include *impossible* since it obeys other socio-temporal laws. Secondly, it makes synchronization with the temporalities that it includes *unnecessary*, because its homogeneous mixture is precisely what constitutes the network time. How questionable this separation process is that rids itself of the need for synchronization in two ways becomes clear when it becomes a part of time *practices* – as is seen in the attempt of the Swiss company Swatch to introduce a single Internet time.

## 2. THE CLAIM FOR A SINGLE INTERNET TIME

The Canadian engineer Sir Sandford Fleming, whose role in an ›invention‹ of a still relevant world time is traced by Clark Blaise in his book *Time Lord*, initially had a more radical version of a standard time in mind. Prior to determining the zero meridian in Greenwich, which meant relocating standard time on the globe, Fleming's first attempt was to establish an ›abstract world time‹ – a time independent of any regional time. In a complete fusion of time and space, he designed a measurement of time in which the hours are specified using one of the 24 letters that de-

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4 | It is not surprising that precisely this problem of mutual interference and the need for coordination of differing times was emphasized in an Internet critical perspective (Lovink 2008, 167–180).

note the standard meridians and which, as a universal reference system, are easily convertible into the respective local times.<sup>5</sup> This system would not give preference to any meridian. As a regulator of this (standard) world time Fleming designs the technology of the telegraph – the *Victorian Internet* (Standage 1999) – that he was later developing into a global network by a transpacific cable:

»The standard time-keeper is referred to the centre of the earth in order clearly to bring out the idea, that it is equally related to every point on the surface of the globe. The standard might be stationed anywhere, at Yokohama, at Cairo, at St Petersburg, at Greenwich or at Washington. Indeed, the proposed system if carried into force, would result in establishing many keepers of standard time, perhaps in every country, the electric telegraph affording the means of securing perfect synchronism all over the earth« (Blaise 2002, 130).

Fleming's utopia of a universal single day, which initially still considers local times, but increasingly makes them unimportant and thus is freeing time from national interests, failed – according to Blaise – in the political calculus of the International Meridian Conference in 1884. But from the perspective of the author this was not the last breath of the idea: At the time Blaise wrote his book *Time Lord* in the late 1990s, Swatch just suggested a new time order. Blaise is sure that Fleming now is a contemporary since suddenly, the introduction of a universal standard time is not far off: »The Swatch Company, Swiss watchmakers, have even proposed an Internet Time that is also universal, allowing users in various parts of the world to bypass time zones and rendezvous in the same ›real‹ time« (Blaise 2002, 134).

Similar to Fleming about a century earlier, the watch company planned a revolution of time, which was to bring about standardization and abstraction. This was to be achieved by the establishment of an absolute time that would create a world without time zones, since it would be independent of different regional times. The Swatch model was not the only invention that is proposed at this time. There were other Internet times suggested by artistic groups or software developers (Lovink 2003, 146; Terranova 2004, 39). However, the Swatch Internet time did receive most of the attention. The Swatch Internet time is both more radical and more moderate than Fleming's Universal Day. It is more radical because it eliminates the division of the day according to the units of clock time. Instead of a non-decimal division of 24 hours and its division according to the Babylonian standard of 60 minutes or 3600 seconds, it breaks the day in 1000 so-called ›beats‹, which are each 86.4 seconds long. Thus, it promises a simple predictable timing of the digital time.

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5 | Fleming's goal was to systematize the countless different local times and confusing schedules for rail travel with this method: »M.05 means merely that it is five minutes past the M hour, which follows L and leads to N. it is not important to know what the letters correspond to in old-style numbered hours, since communications and schedules would only appear in the new style. One schedule would fit all listings, in all localities« (Blaise 2002, 131).

The model is more moderate – one could also say inconsistent – since in contrast to Fleming's ideal it cannot function without a localizable prime meridian. As an official reference for the Internet time, Swatch even introduced a new meridian that ran through the Swatch's Offices in Biel, Switzerland, as a visible mark. An entrepreneurial calculus emerged in place of a national one. Midnight Central European time (the summer time is not taken into account) is equivalent to Internet time ›@000 Swatch.beats‹. In terms of Greenwich Mean Time or the Coordinated Universal Time (UTC) that replaced it in 1972, the Internet time is oriented on the time zone UTC+1, and thereby anchors itself back into the old order of time. The new ›Biel Mean Time‹ (BMT) that is to constitute the reference point for the new order of time applicable anywhere in the world, is thus still dependent on local time and favors again one meridian. The significant difference is, however, that Swatch – following Marshall McLuhan's idea of a global village (Terranova 2004, 39) – now wants to measure the time uniformly all over the world and thus produces the appropriate ›Swatch Beat‹ watches, which not only display the clock time, but also the time in beats that is the same everywhere in the world.

The medial technology of digital networking forms not – as the *Victorian Internet* in Fleming's argumentation did – a synchronization instrument but rather the declared reference point of the entire project. Prerequisite for the introduction of the Swatch Internet time is precisely the idiomatic of the temporal ecology of the network time as it can be observed at Castells, Lévy, and others: »Cyberspace has no seasons. The virtual world is absent of night and day. Internet time is not driven by the sun's position; it is driven by yours – your location in space and time« (Negroponte, quoted in Gibbs 1998). What Castells criticizes as ›timeless time‹ and thus as a destabilization of existing time structures, forms in the design of the Internet time the starting point for a new time order. Without having to consider time zones a New Yorker could arrange to meet at a certain beat time with a chat partner in Rome – still proclaimed by Swatch on its website in 2013: »Because internet time is the same all over the world« (Swatch 2013a).

The abstraction of the temporal order from environmentally and cosmological differences is not due to the Victorian ideal of world citizenship, as in the previous attempt. Economic interests are clearly in the foreground. With the Internet time the Swatch Group, foremost their Chairman and CEO Nicolas G. Hayek, certainly pursues a marketing strategy in order to secure the visibility and expansion of the brand. Of interest to the question of the media or technological change of temporality and the ensuing need for stabilization of a social time is, however, that the introduction of Internet time is linked closely to that of the clock time system.

The standardization of time not only includes the socio-political negotiation of obligatory time models, but also cultural techniques of time measurement (Macho 2003), that both include craftsmanship in the clock and watch production and affiliated economic interests of a responsible clock and watch industry. The clock- and watchmaking tradition, the making of coordinated normal or central clocks and

watches with increasing accuracy, is closely intertwined with a history of standardization of social time (Galison 2006). As a company established in the early 1980s, Swatch does not seem to be directly involved in the formation of an authoritative time order. It is, however, indicative of the interdependence of economy and time systems that Swatch prides itself as the official rescuer of the Swiss clock and watch industry by introducing the lightweight and colorful plastic watches – an attempt to fight the competition from Asia and ongoing international competition. This is even more significant as Swiss clock and watch tradition, which had been relying on craftsmanship and high quality, was in crisis during the late 1970s. The Swatch as ›Second Watch‹ is introduced to the market not only as a timepiece, but also as a lucrative element of a new lifestyle: »A Swatch watch was an expression of joy, a provocative statement, a warm smile delivered with a flick of the wrist. Today, the revolution continues: Swatch talks and everyone understands« (Swatch 2013b; Wathieu, Knoop, and Reavis 1999).

The inclusion characteristics of an identity forming watch ›for everybody‹ found a logical continuation in the introduction of the Internet time, which was to allow for a new global time ›for everybody‹. This is also connected to a certain lifestyle, and Swatch, with its proclamation that the difference of night and day on the Internet is no longer important, addresses primarily »affluent cyber-youngsters« (Lovink 1998, 3). This is illustrated by Swatch through winning over Nicholas Negroponte, a prominent proponent of the new order of time. Negroponte also proclaims the Swatch Internet time as an ›all-inclusion‹ (Schneider 2008, 23) as »absolute time for everybody« (Negroponte, quoted in Wathieu, Knoop, and Reavis 1999, 133) and attends the inauguration of the BMT Meridian on October 23, 1998. Negroponte not only is the founder and director of the Media Lab at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, but has hailed the coming future of a more comprehensive digitization and its impact on all areas of life in his book *Being Digital* (Negroponte 1995), published a few years earlier. The Swatch Internet time is a translation of the clock time into the digital network time, which retains its principles of sequentially, a standardized chronology, and the interests of its key players. It appears at first glance as a successful stabilization of the ›timeless time‹ of the Internet, as a response to the lost time order. The self-proclaimed time revolution of the Swiss company encountered some public attention and critical analysis. Time measured in beats appears in Sony Computer games, Apple iMacs, but also on the CNN news channel, and the CNN website (Wathieu, Knoop, and Reavis 1999, 140).

The ideology of a global time is characterized by the net activist, Internet critic, and contemporary media scientist Geert Lovink, a few weeks after the establishment of the Biel meridian as just the form of tyranny that Castells diagnosed – with a socio-critical undercurrent – as the time of the network society. The Flexibilization of a 24-hour uninterrupted work time for globally cooperating companies, which Castells implicitly criticized, was, according to Lovink, exactly in the in-

terest of Swatch Internet time. Moreover, it was compatible with a time that has detached itself from the natural and social rhythms – even if Castells does not mention the possibility of a »spaceless, virtual time standard, located within the networks, no longer referring to the geographic Greenwich Mean Time« (Lovink 1998, 2). Thus from Lovink's point of view, the aspirations of the Swatch Group must be countered resistively. He opposes the unified time of the network society, now equipped with temporal order, with the concept of a multiplicity of time (and space), which also circulates around the year 2000:

»Still, we could become polymorphous, again and again: there are many times, not one time. The diversity of times is in danger. There are the cosmic, astrological, dream times. And there are many cyberspaces, not just the internet. Let the net.times roll, and let us come up with an open source standard, a virtual time which belongs to all, and nobody. Let us fight corporate takeover, and celebrate the wild diversity of all possible wetware times: the ecstatic time of the never-ending rave, the time of fate, the time stretch of media mixes. There is the extensive time of boredom and reflection, and our intense times of experience and flashes of pleasure and enlightenment. And let us ignore all clocks, especially the ones from Swatch, whether real or virtual« (Lovink 1998, 3).

In Lovink's plea for a diverse ›net.time‹ (a hint toward the network-critical mailing list ›nettime‹, which he co-founded in 1995) the differences blur between Swatch Internet time and clock time. Both mechanisms of discipline were to endanger the temporal ecology of the web culture and a virtual time, which in turn will be available ›for everybody‹ – without allowing for a privileged access or entrepreneurial seizure, without exposing any socially uniform time from the wild temporal diversity, and without opposing this diversity in a regulating manner.

Equating Swatch time and clock time is not to be dismissed easily: Swatch just does not succeed to overcome the existing standardization of time since Internet time is only a variation of the existing universal time overarching time zones and is therefore redundant. Thus, at the end of the 1990s we can read in a critical user comment on the Swatch website: »A measure of time independent of borders and places was invented [a] long time ago. It's used every day in Aviation (civil & military) and navel business around the world. It's called UTC (Universal Time Coordinated)« (Wathieu, Knoop, and Reavis 1999, 141). The time practices on the Internet are in agreement with the commentator. Although the Swatch website does currently indeed display the time in beats and converts the different local times into the uniform Internet time, in the practices of the users this time scheme has not prevailed.

However, what characterizes the call for a global Internet time irrespective of the question whether the Swatch model is more than a PR gimmick, are two aspects that point to the need for stabilization of a sociotechnical time under the conditions of digital networked media. First, as Tiziana Terranova shows, the idea of a global time that is to correspond to the global space of the Internet, aims at

the core of a problem resulting from the relationship of the Internet to dispersed locations, often connected to the ›real‹, thus Castells ›space of places‹. The idea of a global Internet time refers to the fact that since the 19<sup>th</sup> century a valid division of the globe into 24 separated time zones with a dateline no longer really fits the technological conditions of networked media (Terranova 2004, 40). The making of a temporal refuge is one possibility to confront this problem. This idiomatic process of separating the Internet from all times located ›externally‹ is premised by ›theorists‹ and ›practitioners‹ of Internet time, when they state temporal destabilization or search for a new stability.

Regardless of the fact that Castells ›timeless time‹ is an empty space, Lévy's collective subjective time of cyberspace utopia, and the Swatch Internet time unnecessary, the demand for a consistent Internet time refers to a second aspect. This is the need for a collaborative community-forming function of time and a sociality of time. It becomes apparent when the stability of the binding time order threatens to get lost and must be re-invented. Lovink's plea for a wild temporal diversity, that is to oppose any temporal unity or unification figures, also reflects the idiom of separating ›cyberspaces‹ from other social, natural, technical, and cosmological times, even if they are included ostensibly in his argument. Lovink ignores the demand for synchronization that is at the center of each negotiation of a socially sharable time. He claims a carefree coexistence of multiple temporalities in the refuges of net culture.

However, the inventors of the Swatch time are right in one decisive point: Given the conditions of digital networked media, the need for temporal tuning does not disappear, rather, given the temporal multiplicity of the digital, it increases. At the same time, the limitations or lack of applicability of a single Internet time shows – and here again Lovink is right – that the solution to this problem cannot lie in a temporal unit, as it prevailed after the modification of Fleming's models in the 19<sup>th</sup> century with the Greenwich Mean Time. Moreover, the solution is certainly not a unit time resulting from entrepreneurial calculation implemented from above. To describe the temporal coordination in the Internet, the focus is to be directed rather on the particular situation, depending on the type of encounter of human and technical actors, on their ›inter-facing‹, in which they agree selectively and temporarily on a common time without generating a binding and valid time order across all boundaries and time zones.

### **3. WEB PRACTICES AND BENDABLE TIME ZONES**

The boundaries between time zones are settings based on socio-political, economic and time-technical negotiations. They do not run in a straight line. They are of different widths, and they are crossed by protrusions and fine distinctions in half or even three-quarter hour differences. They are not fixed permanently, but can be

moved and redrawn, such as the connection of the Baltic republics to the time zone in Finland at the time of Perestroika (Castells [1996] 2000, 463). The standardized time zones, can, however, geographically be located and marked on a map – at least for a certain duration. The movements of people and technical objects (goods, news, and transportation means) are independent of the location. A long flight from Frankfurt to Sydney crosses several time zones and does not carry the scope of the Central European local time, which at the latest becomes clear to the passengers at their stopover in Singapore. This was also still the case for rail travel in the United States prior to the introduction of a universal world time. A train traveled the entire route, crossing a variety to differing local times, on the time system read on the clocks at the headquarters of each railway company. Thus, it traveled within its own time zone expanding it to the destination stations. The travelers there had to not only navigate the maze of different arrival and departure times, but also convert these into the respective local time (Blaise 2002, 69–71).

Despite of in the meantime geographically fixed time zones and their orientation according to a universal world time, it appears that based on the conditions of digital and networked media, the extensibility of the time zones has in some way returned. If users do not change the time zone in the clock of their mobile computer, or in the account settings in their social media profiles, they ›take‹ their own time zone ›away‹ when they move across the zones. It is also possible that the abandoned time zone determines the data even after the time has been changed. This can be quite complicated for the synchronization of electronic calendar entries.

Time zone information can also easily be changed in the profile settings of most digital networks and thus also in Twitter (which will serve here as an example). This can be quite consequential. For example, to confuse the Iranian authorities and to hide the multitude of manipulated profiles of the regional twittering revolutionaries (Terdiman 2009), Twitter circulated in June 2009 the request to switch the location of the user profile to Tehran and the time to +3:30 GMT. The flexibility of the time zone setting in Twitter can also be utilized for social media experiments: since end of August 2011 the 24-year-old Oxford graduate Alwyn Collinson tweets historical reports of the Second World War ›in real time‹. He reported via Twitter on war events on the same date and at almost the same time as they have occurred 72 years ago. He not only uses a particular software that allows sending tweets automatically at a specified time, but he also changes the reference to location and local time in his tweets and thereby pretends to send messages in constant exchange from the time zone of New York, Berlin, Moscow, or Tokyo (@RealTimeWWII 2013).

In these cases, the temporal order seems, in the sense of Castells, to lie in the power of the users who can manipulate it at will regardless of ›actual‹ time zones in the ›space of places‹. However, a closer look at discourse practices within the Twitter community shows that this flexibility of time zones is not accompanied by a complete loss of order and does not indicate that there is no need for synchro-

nization (Dang Anh, Einspänner, and Thimm 2013). Particularly in coordinating practices, a flexible concept of the ›time zone‹ plays an important role. It represents a transient stability of an expected common time or at least, it makes time the subject of negotiation processes.

Entering the words ›time zone‹ or ›timezone‹ in the search function of the micro-blogging service shows that in the messages the users send the question of what time zone they are in, always plays a major role. This applies to not only the place and time of their tweets but can also be inferred from the tweets on their content level. These negotiations concern a search for the best point in time in the global real time stream of twittering, a point in time in which messages are received *just in time* or special events like a live webcam transmission are not missed; they concern a synchronization of a user with his or her ›followers‹ (those who can see his tweets in their personal timelines), and does not sleep when everyone is waiting for new tweets. Alternatively, to point out another example, these negotiations concern the case that a fan can be near his or her favorite idol, knowing that the idol gets up at the same time in the morning to send the first tweets of the day. In such negotiations of ›encounters‹ in the sense of an interfacing of users, time techniques, and real-time technologies the term ›timezone‹ is common – both as categorizing hashtag (#timezone) and as a simple term that is used in numerous tweets. The tag refers thereby still to the division of the globe, the same way it was done in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, however, not entirely in the same way. This becomes clear when looking at two different points of time in the Twitter search:

›one direction is in the same time zone as me now! Maybe a twitcam will happen soon and it wont be super late!«

›@iamdaisygrrrl oh ok! How come are we missing each other so much now that we are almost same time zone? dont like this«

›Seriously loving being in the same time zone as most of my followers. Moving to Ireland.. anybody in?«<sup>6</sup>

›Which timezone is heartbreaker being realeased in??«

›i love having Justin in the same timezone as me it is so convenient«

›@Make-orBreak oooo ya your timezone is different :-)«<sup>7</sup>

These samples are unsystematic, offer more of a setting for questions than empirically tenable statements about places, and Twitter users that miss each other because of uncoordinated time zones. A comprehensive analysis of tweets with varying search terms could be included here, supplemented by further research into the uses of Twitter in different geographic time zones and the mobility of users between these zones. However, another aspect is here in the foreground. Castells

6 | Tweets, June 6, 2012, search result for ›same time zone‹.

7 | Tweets, October 5, 2013, search result for ›timezone‹.

states that the flexibility of time is a problem of the network society, because it is meant as an economic power over the operating times of the subjects and the loss of their natural and social rhythms. Twittering on the other hand seems to provide an opportunity for bending the time order that no longer fits and that cannot be replaced by a new type of Internet time, according to personal needs without fully abandoning it.

The concept of flexibility is instructive for these findings: In his socio-critical analysis of the demand for flexible human behavior at the time of the new capitalism Richard Sennett goes back to the meaning of the English word ›flexibility‹ in the 15<sup>th</sup> century:

»Its meaning originally derived from the simple observation that though a tree may bend in the wind, its branches spring back to their original position. ›Flexibility‹ names the tree's capacity both to yield and to recover, both the testing and the restoration of its form« (Sennett 1998, 46).

The shape of the tree, its identity and identifiability as tree, remains the same even if its branches are pliable. Transferred to the concept of the time zone in the discourse practices of twittering this does not mean that the geographically situated time zones are now leaving their place for a certain moment, to shift and then return back to their conventionally given position. For Twitter users, the term is rather abstracted form boundary markers on the globe. The term refers to the *function* of the ›time zone‹ as a *cultural technology of time* to define a common shared time and to make it identifiable in its ordering form. Twitter users do not automatically assume common time zones when they speak about them, but rather turn them as social time techniques into an object of a meta-time technical negotiation and in this sense create a stretchable term. It is not important, in which time zones the users are located on the globe. It is important that they are in the same or different zones, move back and forth between them, and that their messages, synchronized or desynchronized, relate to each other.

The term time zone has thereby not completely stripped itself of its reference to the spatial-temporal order system of standard time. The danger of Twitter users mutually missing each other is due to a limited disposal of time and a restricted availability of common time. This is determined by multiple technological, natural, and human times that are tied to specific places and situations. In the susceptibility and disorder of a common time it becomes apparent that online and offline areas are just not separable from one another, but are interwoven. The Internet is not a temporal habitat in which time flows according to its own rules. The socio-technical conditions of the Internet are rather part of a mix of multiple, overlapping, mutually interfering, and influencing temporalities.

Against the background of the search for temporal stability based on the conditions of digital media – as this contribution has attempted to outline on three levels – we can observe a way of dealing with the concept of time zone in the dis-

course practices of the Twitter community that differs from Castells diagnosis of society or time techniques of Swatch. Instead of continuing the dichotomy of stabilizing, tidying, spatialized or sequential time on the one hand and its destabilization by a ›wild multiplicity‹ of time on the other hand, we can here observe a negotiation about commonly shared and in this sense social times especially with regard to flexibility of order categories. The time zone is an expandable area that can enclose a community defining its common ›being in time‹ as a provisional and flexible stabilization, which may correspond to the constant transformations of a sociotechnical collective.

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