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There is no dance floor any more
Love is the structure of the overall agreement of the agreed text.

– Cameron
There are these moments in life that are just etched into your brain. The excitement of your first day of school. The warm sensation of your first kiss. The beating of your heart when you fall in love. The bleak pain of losing a beloved person. There are moments like these defining the biography of every human being – moments you will talk about for years to come, surrounded by friends and family, laughing and back-slapping. Happy and sad moments, quiet or thoughtful ones.

“Do you remember back when…?”

I don’t actually remember when I talked to Stephan Urbach in person for the first time. It must have been sometime in 2011, at that point somewhere between spring and summer when the days are getting longer, and the evenings are still radiant from the heat of the day. I also don’t remember what the topic of our first net-induced conversation was. It most likely had to do with the interview I was planning to conduct with this well-known spokesperson of the Telecomix network for my podcast. Thanks to their astonishing activities during the Arab Spring, Telecomix had become quite famous, and so had Stephan Urbach.

Actually, I should be able to remember, because this was how one of my best friends ever stepped into my life. Maybe that first moment is lost to me precisely because the person I first talked to was “the other Stephan Urbach” – the prominent Internet activist, well known from radio and television. I hadn’t yet met my friend, tomate. Only later, when we started working on texts together, when we started communicating more frequently, did I realize how clearly the line was drawn between the public persona, the hero, and the man behind it. How the success of the Internet activist tomate had led the person Stephan Urbach to the brink of collapse. How despite the “getting things done” attitude of the activist Stephan Urbach, the immediate experience of the people suffering in Syria had slowly begun to eat away at my compassionate friend tomate.

The story that this book tells is a tale of almost failing. A story of self-abandonment and self-destruction, and an eye-witness account to all those things that the relevant press photos and newspaper articles neglect to tell us. We forget all too easily, and happily, that all notable achievements and events are driven by the people invested in them. People who stand up in the face of disaster, in the face of suffering and injustice, and say: “No more.”

When the flurry of headlines has passed, and the media circus has moved on to its next arena, the people – the ones affected, as well as the activists – stay behind, alone with each other.

The British philosopher Bertrand Russell began the preface of his autobiography with the following words: “Three passions, simple but overwhelmingly strong, have governed my life: the longing for love, the search for knowledge, and unbearable pity for the suffering of mankind.”

I always had this sentence in mind as I was reading the story. This compassion for the suffering of mankind could break even the strongest in our midst, I thought. Those who make valiant gestures for all of us, we tend to elevate them, and transform them into larger-than-life, heroic figures. And then we act all surprised when they have a breakdown. From all the stress, the burden, the suffering; from their own inability to lead the world onto a better path.

That is another reason why stories from people like Stephan Urbach matter. Not just for us to
That is another reason why stories from people like Stephan Urbach matter. Not just for us to understand that great deeds can come from our midst, even from within ourselves, but for us to accept that we really have to take care of these people who are throwing themselves into the fire for us. Support them, as friends, as an anchor on the firm side of the world, in the tide of the near-mythical events of world politics.

I am lucky and privileged to call tomate my friend, and grateful to have him in my life. This book has unveiled many new facets of my friend's personality for me. It leaves me in awe of what human willpower can accomplish. And it has rekindled my desire to take better care of the people who are close to me. My desire to make the world just a little bit better, now, at this very moment, with this very breath. And you can't expect more than that from any book in the world.
This Is My Story

I have something to confess. Something very personal. I wanted to die.

I gulp and keep staring at what I've written, probing every single word with my eyes and scanning its underlying meaning. DIE. The word burns a hole in my retina; it hurts just to look at. Did I really want to die? Yes, in fact I did. I was ready to be liberated from this nightmare that the others called "life". But on the night of August 12 to 13, 2011, I chose otherwise. I chose life, even though at the time, I had no idea what that was supposed to mean any more. What life might even be any more. After all I had experienced, I felt like an empty shell, ready to dissolve into thin air.

As for my suicide, I had it all worked out. I had thought about how to do it, and acquired the necessary tools. And I had made arrangements for my family to gain access to my Internet accounts. I had spent ninety percent of my life on the Internet – it was simply where I lived. So I wrote down how to retrieve my e-mail accounts, my server, my chat sessions, and made a list of those who were to be notified of my death. I will not describe how I was going to do it. That's none of anyone's business, and in the end, it hardly matters. My death was supposed to set a marker. A full stop. Nothing more.

On my server, I had installed a "dead man's switch". Which meant I had to type in a certain command once every 24 hours, so that my system knew I was still alive. And if I neglected to enter the code, the system would know what it had to do: One last blog post would appear on my website, automatically disseminated through my Twitter account. My father would receive a farewell note by e-mail. My chat sessions would terminate automatically, simply by having my nicknames exit all active channels. Another e-mail with the access details for various online systems would be relayed to a few members of the Telecomix activist group. And, most importantly, my private e-mail account would empty itself automatically, while the details for yet another account were to be sent to selected friends. There was not much else for me to pass on, but even my will would have been sent out automatically. I had thought of everything. My depression had forced me into wanting to leave it all behind. But before everything came to an end, I wanted to prepare that ending in an orderly fashion. My life had been anything but orderly. Still, that's how I wanted the ending to be: orderly.

I was suffering from depression. It seems strange, labelling it so clearly now. I must have been aware of it for a very long time, yet I had been unable to put my state down in words. Because I was scared, because I wasn't willing to bear that truth. Depression… that was what other people had. Those overambitious workaholics and burnout-ridden CEO types… but not me. Depression was for the weak. But me? I wasn't weak. I was tough as an old boot, and never one to be easily shaken. It had all just been a tiny bit too much. Finding yourself unable to work, drained or just overtired – that could happen to anyone, couldn't it?

But I was not just temporarily overtired, over-worked, worn out, exhausted. I was literally at the end of my physical and mental resources. The symptoms were clear. The emptiness that welled up inside me whenever I was not sitting in front of my computer. That dreadful emptiness. The sensation of futility that inflated like a sponge in my mind whenever I couldn't find the distraction that I sought like a junkie on withdrawal. This deep sense of worthlessness that crept up every time my computer screen stayed blank, every time there were no symbols flashing up to indicate that someone wanted to communicate. This diabolical void would turn into pain when I was alone with myself for too long. A pain that came from deep within my soul. The emptiness was a light-dark grey, filling up everything inside me with that great nothingness, suppressing reality, leaving no more space for the real world, banishing all colour and wholesome feeling.
It sounds silly. But nothing could fulfill me except for the blinking of the cursor on my screen. If the cursor was blinking, everything was all right. No emptiness, no fear. It lent some meaning to my existence. Someone wanted to connect. I had something to do. Or at least an urge to be active on the Internet. I was stuck in an infinite loop, sucking me downwards in a spiralling tailspin. The windows of my chat room were more real to me than the trees outside my kitchen window. More real than the sun heating up the windows to my apartment.

A single Twitter message was more relevant than daily hygiene. Even taking a shower would cause me pain. Standing under the shower, I could feel my heart beat. I could hear the rush of blood in my ears, and sense how lonely I was. Even the sound of water would fade behind the droning noise in my ears. But life sounds different. It doesn't sound like this noise in my ears. Life, that's the wind in the treetops, the roar of an engine on the street, the patter of footsteps on cobblestones. Life is the sound of playing children, the sound of music drifting out of a café, the song of birds hailing the new day. All those sounds most people would dismiss as mere noise. But I constantly had this other noise in my ear. The sound of loneliness. And with that sound, the fear started to creep in – the dread that my own existence was nothing but petty, meaningless functionality. An organism just functions. You just have to function. Day after day after day. Get up, get dressed, work, eat, sleep. But that was not what I wanted to settle for. And who would? Mere functioning. Like a damn robot, like a zombie. But how do you really live your life? How do you live it well? How do you find happiness? I had never learned. I simply did not know.

Then I fought. I fought my own sleep patterns, my eating habits, the need for recreation that my tired brain desperately craved. It became normal for me to stay awake for thirty hours or more at a time. I fought sleep itself. I fought life.

Death, the brother of sleep. I just wanted to sleep. Sleep forever, and finally get some rest. Just for once, sleep well, sleep tight. Just spread out my tired arms, close my eyes and make the world outside vanish. Make it disappear so I wouldn't have to bear it any longer.

Then all the terrible news started pouring in. Day after day, I followed these tragic events. Even though they did not concern me directly, because I lived so far away, those news items touched me – and they hit me hard, like arrows fired into my soul. I felt increasingly under pressure to support those who were fighting for their freedom under such dangerous circumstances. I was a member of the Internet activist group Telecomix, an international network of hackers and net activists. We had decided to help the protesters of the Arab Spring, for example by restoring the Egyptian Internet via dial-up connections when the Mubarak regime had it shut down. We helped the opposition in Syria publish their videos online, documenting an inconceivable level of cruelty. But the more we helped, the greater our responsibility became, and the greater my responsibility became. I was swamped, 24/7, and inclined to forget about my own life, which just seemed to be retreating further and further into the grey fogs of depression.

Cairo. Tripoli. Damascus. All those places where people had stood up to fight for their rights, from December 2010 onwards, during what would come to be known as the Arab Spring. Fighting for freedom of speech, for freedom of choice. Against the rule of old men, for more self-determination. We just had to help. After all, that was what our European culture was built on. Freedom and self-determination. Or wasn't it?! These values that had to be defended, any time and any place, just like we'd learned in school. Or could it be that “freedom” is little more than a hollow term for most of us? Those who have always lived in freedom hardly know what it feels like when it's lacking. And there are many who don't even require it, don't even want it. They are happy as long as there is someone telling them what to do, day after day.
“Freedom” – in many ways just a word with no flesh and bone. “Self-determination” is a similarly vague term, of the kind that Western politicians like to toss into the debate. But with that decision, with Telecomix resolving to help the people of Egypt and Syria with our technical skills, these concepts suddenly turned to life, from one moment to the next. We who had grown up with the Internet, who had come to know and love it and experience it as a haven of liberty, we understood this freedom intuitively. We wanted to help people to be just as free. Because we too were free.

Of course, that was a naive idea. We were young and driven by the righteousness of our actions. We never had a doubt. We were sure we were doing the right thing. And so we helped people from all over the world to make their voices heard – we gave them a voice on the Internet. But when the first of these voices died, the first of them were killed, everything escalated. On the outside, and then: in ourselves.

I was obsessed. Obsessed with the idea of having to help these people. The obsession deprived me of my mind and sleep. I was drinking too much. I smoked like a chimney. I saw no meaning in my life. I forgot what was good for me – sleep, leisure, music, movies. Just hanging out with friends, without constantly thinking about what was happening to the people in all these cruel places during the revolutions. I had forgotten how to take care of myself. Probably I couldn't have anyway, even if I had wanted to.

Then came the day when I realized I was lost. Lost in a life that no longer felt like mine. That was when the reset came; my reboot.

In order to understand why I wanted to kill myself, I have to go back. I have to go back in time to understand how this could all come to pass. I have to tell this tale. My story may seem shocking, it might in parts ring hollow and hard to believe. Sometimes I feel as if my whole life is a soap opera. Or a thriller... But I assure you: Everything happened just like that. That was the way it was; I'm certain of it, because I experienced it. Because this story is my story.
Seeker of Worlds

It's dark and quiet. Only the bright light from my laptop illuminates the room. My moving boxes are still stacked in a big heap. I haven't unpacked a thing yet. But the time for that will come. I can sense it when I look out into the night. My window opens out into a deep black ocean, I feel like sinking into it and drifting away. As black as the coffee I'm drinking incessantly. I normally have it with milk and sugar, to take the edge off the bitterness. But today I'm drinking it black, without milk, because of course I haven't been shopping. Typical.

Outside, the Hessian backwaters. I still can't quite believe I came back. After all that's happened. Back to where I became the person I am today. Or at least in part. I just had to come back. I literally know every cobblestone here. It's where I feel at home. And after all the madness, it was just what I needed: a sense of security.

You may have already noticed: I have a penchant for the theatrical, for pathos. And when all these memories surface, when they bubble and churn around in my belly, I am prone to sentimentality. Is home even the right word here? Home is a strange word. It has an empty, hollow sound to it, something people say although it doesn't mean much to them. Fog is creeping through the garden, its ghostly fingers reaching for the grass, the bushes and trees, the world. It really is difficult: remembering, snatching my memories back from the fog that has already taken hold in my head like a tumor, and then setting them out in front of me, sharp and clear like photographs. My childhood, my family home, my life at the time. What was it like, then, my life?

Maybe that's where I should begin my story: When you talk about the reasons for a miserable childhood, you often evoke that image of a boy who is always chosen last for the school football team. Because he is too small, too fat, too clumsy. Because he looks different or is different. Children can smell that sort of thing. And they are relentless, of course. I was one of these poor little suckers. Not only was I picked last, no, the boys would even argue which team would finally have to take me in!

When you're young, something like that just hits with full force. It can tear your heart out. You just can't understand why the others are so mean, why they don't want anything to do with you, why they leave you out. It takes a lot of time for that pain to pass, for you to draw strength from it – from being different. And when it passes, you grow beyond yourself, and shout out: Fuck you!

It just takes a while to get there. And even so, it's not self-evident that all would have turned out well in the end. The first four or five years of my life were spent in a rental house in Mörfelden-Walldorf, a small town in the Rhine-Main area. Mörfelden-Walldorf. Which is exactly as it sounds: boring, stifling, toxic to anything with a semblance of freedom. My family lived on the first floor of a three-party house. Our landlords, the Frank family, lived on the ground floor.

I don't remember much from this time, except that the Franks let me play in their garden. I was a curious child and enjoyed exploring my environment. Which meant: the garden. At the time, I hadn't yet developed my phobia of nature, with all its disgusting creepies and crawlies. Nor my phobia of the petit bourgeoisie. Until one day, the Franks slipped a letter underneath our apartment door, as the middle-class society will do when it's unable to come out and say something in so many words. The letter read: "We are sorry but we can no longer allow your son Stephan to play in our garden, because he always demolishes the flowers". So now I was a garden hooligan… and my explorations soon came to their untimely end. Some three decades after its founding, the Federal Republic I was growing up in was still a small-minded village, a place where people eyed their neighbours with resentment and mistrust, sneakily restricting each other's mobility and freedom. What mattered most was social status,
mistrust, sneakily restricting each other's mobility and freedom. What mattered most was social status, careers, prosperity. Who had the nicest car? Who had already built a house? Who could afford to go on holiday twice a year? Most people were well off, financially. Those who wanted to find work could. Or so they said. You voted either SPD or CDU. The 1968 student movement had been the first to question the staleness of the Bonn Republic. Then came the punks, who shat on the affluent society, and spat on the future. Then the Greens, who attacked the establishment and their nuclear energy politics. If you wanted to be more independent, more free than the rest, you could. Or so they said. Because we lived in West Germany, of course, and not in the Soviet bloc. Although this freedom apparently did not extend to playing in neighbours' gardens.

In 1986, in the fourth year of the democratic dictatorship that Helmut Kohl would sustain until 1998, my parents bought what all West German, middle-class families bought in the Eighties: a family home, a storage space for life, complete with garden and garage. My father, who was from an old Frankfurt family of bureaucrats himself, worked, quite unsurprisingly for Frankfurt, in a bank. So an income that guaranteed our credit-worthiness was forthcoming. My mother stayed at home.

For the sake of completeness, I should mention that my parents are not my real parents, or rather not my biological parents. They adopted me as a baby, just like my brother who is three years older than me.

I have known I'm adopted since I can't even remember when. It was always clear to me that my parents were my parents. My so-called biological parents didn't interest me. They apparently had not wanted me. That can happen in the best of families. Only once I hit puberty would I turn it into a problem. Why? Because that's what teenagers do, make a problem out of anything. You don't understand the world, and yourself even less, and all those egos are just populating you like monkeys on a rock. I met my biological mother once, later. Just that once. And even that I could well have done without And my biological father? I know who he is. But I never met him, which is just as well too.

My new home was to become a small, aspiring community on the other side of the river Main, north of the pulsating metropolis of Hanau: Nidderau. The most exciting thing that ever happened here was that Saint Boniface once ambled through Nidderau on his travels. We moved into a house in one of those modern housing estates, where one house is like the other; dull, rectangular boxes of middle-class housing, with rectangular gardens, neatly crafted and arranged, and orderly driveways. A place where the sense of being over-and-over-protected, the silence on weekends, will pound inside your head like a jack-hammer. The kind of silence that can drive you out of your mind.

I would take the bus from there every morning to go to kindergarten, and come back home at lunchtime. On the bus, I always sat at the front, to have a better view out through the large windshield, out into the world. My gaze travelled over lush fields and meadows and into the dense forests we drove through. Right there, in the front seat of that bus, I could forget about everything, go on thought-journeys, and just daydream. Without my stupid neighbours prohibiting it.

Every hill the bus ascended was a little adventure for me: What would be around the next bend? Another deep forest? A ravine? A valley dipped in luminous green by the sunlight? Reaching the top of the hill, my daydreams would finally hit their peak too: Would the bus manage to lift off this time, and fly out into the sky, shiny blue or glowing with stars at night? Of course, they never happened, those adventures on the other side of the mountain. But that did not stop my young self from continuing to dream, and from seeking out those dreams beyond the hills.

Kindergarten, though, was no place for dreamers. I was faced with the tough reality of kids. Which meant: Little Stephan was on his own. The group didn't like him. I couldn't even say why exactly. Even back then, I must have smelled like a nerd and misfit. But the longer the ostracism lasted, the more it hurt, the more firmly I would say to myself: You don't really want to play with these bores anyway, do
hurt, the more firmly I would say to myself: You don't really want to play with these bores anyway, do you?. That thought firmly took hold of me. And pain turned to rage, a sublime kind of anger that turned into an insight that has since crystallized inside me: I didn't want to have to like the other kids. But there was one girl in my group that I did like: Mareike. She had somehow managed to sidetrack my now-customary aversion towards my fellow kindergarten kids. She happened to live very close to my parents' house in Nidderau, so we would occasionally meet up to play on the gray asphalt of the housing estate. Mareike and I were on the same wavelength with our games. We made up wild adventures for the dolls, but they rarely had a happy ending! In the end, a greedy, gruesome monster would always turn up to devour our puppet heroes. I enjoyed that: spurring fantasies, playing fate. And Mareike was enjoying it too. Her small eyes lit up with pleasure when the deadly monster had struck once more, and we both laughed. Mareike would finally disappear from my life again – like almost everyone else with whom I have been reasonably friendly. Until today, I am not exactly good at keeping in touch and maintaining friendships.

School at last. In 1987, I was more than ready. I could hardly wait for my first day of school. I was ready to leave behind the desolate kindergarten with its senseless, prescribed play. I was ready to finally learn to read and write. The world of books and words had caught my attention early on. I had always been fascinated by my father, who would sit in our living room with his nose stuck between the covers of a book, staring at pages filled with strange black squiggles. He could do this for hours without even moving, and I had come to suspect that the character combinations were some sort of code. A code which obviously mesmerized him and somehow transferred him to another world. And that was I wanted too – to get away, out, into another world.

If someone had told me beforehand that it would take this long to learn to crack the code of reading, I likely would have lost some of my keenness. My mum told me years later that I would often come home from school, and in place of a greeting like Hello, would immediately launch into a frenzied complaint along the lines of: We still haven't started writing, what am I even going to school for anyway? Patience has never been my strong suit.

But I found other ways of satisfying my curiosity. As a respectable middle-class family, we would regularly go on skiing holiday to Austria. To pacify me on the long drives, my parents gave me a red Sony Walkman – the ultimate possession in the Eighties. Then a friend of my brother's gave me a cassette. I slid the tape into my Walkman, put the headphones on and pressed the play button, and was instantly assaulted by the sound of screeching guitars, frantic, frenzied, pulsating drums, and infinitely angry vocals that snapped right into my synapses. Before I knew it, my fingers were drumming, my feet were stomping, and my heart was throbbing. This was like nothing I had ever heard before... a sound like a slap in the face, especially for all those teenies and Modern Talking dorks populating my world! At last, this was music that understood me, without me ever having to say a word. This was music that could build me up when I'd had enough. Enough of the over-protected, drowsy life in Nidderau. The German punk of those BRD years, notably the Toten Hosen and Die Ärzte with songs like Dein Vampyr and Mysteryland, were to become the soundtrack for my life. I was particularly taken by the Ärzte's slightly gloomier songs, like the one about the outlaw, El Cattivo: "And he smiles because he knows: Evil will always win! Yes, that's how a cowboy should be, filthy, cowardly and vile – heya ho heya ho, oohoohowoo!"

A badass outlaw, that was what I was going to be... a lone force against everything and anyone. Nobody likes us, but we don't care. I put my headphones on, pressed play, and took it on, that fight against the phantoms of my senseless existence.

Even today, I briefly feel young again whenever I hear one of those three songs. The unwieldy sound was there to fill the unwieldy void that was already forming inside of me like a dark, bulky shadow.
was there to fill the unwieldy void that was already forming inside of me like a dark, bulky shadow. There was nothing that could make me feel truly content, let alone happy. I felt empty. And that made me angry. But even that somehow felt pointless. So I went back to feeling empty again. I was trapped inside myself and knew no way out. It might sound silly. Because my family didn't have to worry about money. Because everything was all right. I had parents. I had a home. We regularly went on holiday, even to the United States. I had a Sony Walkman. So where did this infernal emptiness come from? Is it breathed into some children at birth? Or had the great spectre of the middle class sucked out my soul? I simply didn't understand.

We had a garden of our own, one of those with a well-kept lawn and trimmed shrubs. But even that I used to avoid like the plague. Like a vampire shuns sunlight. My brother had a C64, which we would play Summer Games or Maniac Mansion on. Sometimes I would meet up with Martin, who was a small, chubby nerd like I was, to play around with his Lego Technic. To put it bluntly, Martin was no friend of mine. I liked his toys. But we were too different. He was the quiet, restrained one. I was the loud-mouthed, misanthropic daredevil. It was never a great match. “You're a real couch potato”, my mother would scold. “Just go outside!” But what was I going to do outside? Peer into the sun, squash some ants, hug a tree? Outside – that was where nature lurked, where people and other dangers lurked.

Once I had learned to read and write, my enthusiasm for school quickly waned. I was neither an outstanding nor a poor student. I was frequently restless in class, I tipped my chair back and forth and worked my own way through my textbooks, reading about foreign countries, about history or agriculture. But that meant that my grades in Conduct would regularly only yield an average “3” on my report. The whole full-frontal lecturing style has never really been my thing.

When I think back of my primary school years in Nidderau, I don't see clear images in bright colours, I see a milky grey veil, from behind which I am trying to discern the absurdities of my life. I realize now that this was when I experienced my first depressive episode. At the time, all I could feel was this deep desolation, flowing through my veins and poisoning my soul. And since I couldn't understand what kept me from being an average kid, I couldn't talk to anyone about it either. What could I have said anyway? Hey, Mum. I feel so devoid of hope. Very funny. Go outside and get some fresh air, she probably would have advised.

Sometimes I would stand at my bedroom window at night and stare into the darkness. I would stretch out my arm, trying to snatch away the cloak of darkness, trying to see what was underneath. But my hand only grasped thin air. If I'd have known at the time that this dark cloak would stay with me for a lifetime – I'm not even sure I would still be here today.

Then I moved on to one of those secondary comprehensive schools. Some of the boys in my class had it in for me right from the start. Hey, weirdo, I could hear them call out behind me. At least they didn't beat me up. The middle class kids' preferred form of violence is bullying. A blunt kind of weapon that can be more hurtful than a slap in the face. A blow hurts, briefly and badly. But bullying worms its way into your belly and your heart, and finally, your head. Then came the day when I had really had enough. “What's up, scumbag? In a bad mood again?”, one of them said. I could hear the others laughing. I clung on to my chair, squeezing it tighter and tighter. Anger was boiling up inside me, the veins in my neck starting to pound. I grabbed my chair, and threw it towards the other kid. I had aimed well: My missile hit him right in the face. He bent over and began to howl. His lip was bleeding. I'm not proud of this episode, and I detest violence. But at least the incident brought some good in the end: For the rest of the school year, these kids left me in relative peace. I had made a statement, I'd made my message more than clear.

And a second statement was soon to follow. My brother and his friends were short one player, which was how I got to know the strange and magical world of The Dark Eye. Witches and wizards, dwarves and warriors, fighting to survive the most reckless adventures. Role playing games soon became
and warriors, fighting to survive the most reckless adventures. Role playing games soon became another means for me to plunge into faraway, exciting worlds, even to become a builder of new worlds myself, all as a way of filling up that emptiness. I must have been inspired by the fashion standards of the pen-and-paper games world on the day I decided that I would henceforth only wear black clothes. This felt like the right way of articulating my dark and empty soul outwardly. That's how I became the boy in black, as I soon came to be known throughout Nidderau. Now even Toten Hosen and €rzte could no longer console my feelings of emptiness and rage. Give me more. I want more. Give me more. I needed harder stuff, and discovered punk bands like Slime, Hass, or Daily Terror. Then goth punk like Der Fluch. Then I got into metal and goth metal as well.

My mum wasn't too delighted by my change in style. The more she complained, the more I nurtured my new look. I became the black angel – the lonesome boy in black, the outcast, the one who doesn't belong and doesn't want to.

I wanted to have friends, of course. Because who wants to be alone all the time?! At the same time, I found most people incredibly boring. So there was a dilemma I couldn't resolve. Even my tendencies towards sub-culture didn't bring me any friends, or at least not right away. I was not posh enough for the goths, and not colourful enough for the punks. In that sense I was an outsider even with the outsiders of society. And these sub-cultures didn't get much of a look-in at my school anyway, where most students were the sons and daughters of bankers, doctors, lawyers and teachers. I was one of those middle-class kids myself, but at least my fighting spirit hadn't been operated out of me entirely at birth. Of course there were bitter days, when one of the cool guys was having a big birthday party, one of those to which I was never invited.

Today I can no longer understand why there were these times when I still somehow wanted to belong. Most likely because it just feels shitty when you are left out, when you are lonely and misunderstood. Loneliness undermines you, it eats your soul out and kills your whole being. Looking back more soberly, I can sense that I in fact found the cool kids boring. Their conversations were so superficial that I felt sick to the stomach. They would talk about clothes, about girls, and worst of all, about pop music. My own world was far more exciting and inspiring than that. In my world, I could experience the most fabulous adventures. But not in the desolate world of Nidderau, of course. No, in the world where I had lived ever since I learned to read: in the world of books.
An Inquisitive Mind

Reading became my gateway drug – or rather, books became the gateway to the adventures that I had always seen myself on the verge of on my bus trips. They were also: a way out, an escape route from myself. Every spare minute I had I just went off to my room. I would open up a book and dive right in, travelling 20,000 miles under the sea with Captain Nemo and crossing oceans with Jim Hawkins, searching for Treasure Island.

I devoured everything I could lay my hands on. I read my way from classic adventure tales to more recent fantasy fiction, like Tamora Pierce's *Tale of the Lioness,* and then later, sci-fi veteran Isaac Asimov's *Robot* series. I was particularly impressed with Alanna of Trebond, the heroine of the Black City: a bold and feisty girl with a head just as stubborn as mine. I fell in love with this wild girl who, instead of joining the convent at her family's orders, dressed up as a boy and becomes a fabled knight, taking on gods and villains. I wanted a brave and rebellious friend just like her. Someone who did as she pleased, broke all the rules, and still got what she wanted in the end. Alanna has influenced me so much that even today, I tend to check new acquaintances against whether they are at all like that fearless young noblewoman.

At least that dull, hollow feeling drumming away inside me had not resulted in complete inaction or lethargy. Despite these feelings of emptiness, I was a bright and reasonably confident kid. I retained my curiosity, my will to discover and understand the world around me, even though I found that world so uninspiring. Even at that age I must have suspected: If you know the building blocks and know how to use them, you can help to shape the world.

I owed my inquiring mind to my father. We often visited museums. When I was younger, I used to pepper him with questions. And I had already learned one important lesson: that there were far more questions out there than there were answers. But it was my constant curiosity, my exploratory urge, and my tendency not to take things at face value, that brought me to my second passion: technology.

Since every respectable middle-class home needs a hobby room, my father built one in the basement of our house. This basement was paradise for me. I just stood there, wide-eyed, in the neon-lit room with its whitewashed walls. I stared at the workbench with its massive vice, at the collection of screwdrivers, files and wrenches, at all the screws and bolts sorted into their little drawers, and at the soldering station, which I found especially appealing. My father frequently ordered these Conrad electronics kits. With their tiny, colourful components and green and red LED lights, the brown and green boards seemed like magical devices to me. Even as a child, I would spend hours in that room. All that grinding, screeching, humming and hissing sounded like beautiful music to me. I loved the smell of soldering flux, loved watching my father pottering about, loved watching, transfixed, the trail of sparks that his angle grinder would leave behind. It looked like the tail of a shooting star, like the ones I had occasionally seen fly across the night skies of the Hessian province.

But it wasn't just my father I got my love of technology from, it was my grandfather as well. I spent a lot of time with my grandpa, who was a country fellow. Though quiet, he was a tough one. He was a mechanic by training who had finally made it to mechanical engineer, in which capacity he had travelled all over the world.

When I was six years old, he was working on designing a machine that was supposed to bottle and package detergent in factories in Saudi Arabia. My grandpa showed me the machine on some photographs he had taken. This machine, a monstrous behemoth made of various tubes, funnels, pipes and conveyor belts, fascinated me. For days I could hardly sleep, my mind twisting about,
pipes and conveyor belts, fascinated me. For days I could hardly sleep, my mind twisting about, wondering how this machine might conceivably work. In the end, I drew a sketch of the production process as my young mind imagined it.

My work was rather amateurish, of course, and looked more like some artwork from the early Constructivist period, but I proudly showed it to my grandfather. He took the sheet of draft paper, peered at my awkward efforts, gave me a slightly wide-eyed look and said, in his deep, resonant voice: "Have you been looking at my plans?" Of course I hadn't seen his plans. I hadn't even been aware that you needed plans to be able to construct a machine like this. "Of course not", I said indignantly, at which he disappeared into his study. Through the open door, I saw him open his office cabinet and frantically rummage around among the mass of papers. "Stephan, come here!" He had rolled out a construction plan on the floor, which obviously looked far more professional than my own work. Mysterious symbols and figures were dotted around the straight edges of neatly drawn structures. I looked at the plan intently. "No idea how you did it", my grandfather said. "But you've managed to trace the exact workflow of the production line. Not bad, kiddo." He smiled at me kindly, and I felt incredibly proud of myself.

This is one of the most important memories of my entire life. It is one of the reasons why Stephan, the semi-depressed, misanthropic outsider kid, would become Stephan, the semi-depressed, misanthropic nerd. I really started getting into the world of mechanics and electronics. My grandpa was my tutor, and my father was my patron. When I was only six, I was given a Kosmos electronics construction kit for Christmas, together with a little soldering station of my own. I learned all about resistors and transistors, capacitors and transformers, relays and flip-flop circuits. I soldered the most outlandish components and designed the most absurd power circuits, as long as I could get those LEDs blinking in beautiful hues and colours. I was a little wizard who was soon going to build his first spaceship using an Ultra Time Warp, which would then break through into another dimension.

And by way of electronics, I at last discovered the world of computers, which in the Eighties were conquering offices and children's bedrooms alike. My brother had his own C64 quite early on, and we would play games on it together. But as for me...
and sports stars like Boris Becker and Michael Schumacher were the coolest invention ever. And so my public image of a loner and nerd was manifested further, not that I minded. I was convinced I was part of a clandestine elite, only waiting to write future history.

Then, in the late Eighties, I finally got a C64 of my own, and with the help of the *Data Becker* book series and *64er* magazine, I tested the limits of its computational powers. In the mid-Nineties, I was given my first PC: a Pentium 1 with, believe it or not, 8 MBs of working memory.

I started to spend more and more time at my computer, and soon drifted off entirely into that buzzing digital sphere. That's one of the reasons I can't remember the details of that time very well: what the food smelled like at home, what colour our living room sofa was, what my father's voice sounded like when he was trying to call me back from my digital travels, back into the world of Nidderau. These details, which make our memories so vivid that they can move us to tears as we grow older, have dissolved into nothingness in the fog of time.
The next stage of my digital pupation began when I started discovering the infinite realm of mailboxes, as well as the Bulletin Board System, BBS. Using a Chaos Computer Club instruction leaflet, I had built myself an acoustic coupler – a Datenklo (“data loo”), as this adventurously constructed, but extremely useful device was called back then. The coupler was made of a primitive data modem, which could transmit data via the telephone lines of the German postal services. This meant that you could transfer data, and communicate. Naturally, using one of these Datenklos was illegal, so naturally this appealed to me even more. An illegal tool for getting in touch with other people, who you just knew were out there somewhere. And all of this happened without you ever actually seeing them. A world within a world.

I can still remember how I dialled the number of a mailbox for the first time. I heard the beeping and buzzing in the earpiece of the receiver, which I then placed onto the rubber foam sockets of my coupler. On the monochrome screen, I could slowly, very slowly see a sober menu appear. Like out of nowhere. Suddenly I felt like Captain Kirk on the bridge of the USS Enterprise. My heart was beating, my hands were sweaty. I sat down and reached out to touch the screen with my fingers – like E.T., trying to make contact.

The boards, which you connected to using remote data transmission, displayed an amazing range of topics: There were politics, sex, science fiction series, computer and role-playing games, and hacking, of course. And you could talk about all that with other users too. So that's what I did – excessively. My parents only wondered about the increasing phone bills and my pale complexion. When I came home from school, I would turn on my computer, and instantly be off into the data stream. Hundreds of mailboxes were connected in this manner, clustered into networks called Z-net, FIDO-net or Maus-net.

An infinite, emergent space of absolute freedom, a space beyond the control of adults, and finally, the place where I would find those people I had failed to find in my so-called real life: like-minded peers, who shared my interests in role playing and computers, and were similarly convinced that they were the chosen few, whose skills just weren't appreciated by everyone. Yet.

For many young people who, like me, had started getting heavily into computers from the mid-eighties onwards, there were two things that made it such an important experience: First, the sense of freedom that you felt in these as-yet unregulated and uncontrolled spaces like the mailbox networks. Second, the opportunity to become one of the builders of this new world. Was there anywhere at all in that fusty old Federal Republic where a young person had the possibility of shaping this new world? The sheer enormity of it made my head spin. Just being part of events gave you a feeling of being special.

In retrospect, this was one of the key moments of my political education. I developed an awareness for politics early on. That was of course thanks to my parents, in particular my father, who, like any moderate, prosperous progressive in the eighties, was finding another way of enacting his little self-affirmative rebellions: the ballot box. My father voted for the Greens. He was worried about acid rain, and wary of the local CDU party bigwigs, who the air of provincial homeliness and small-town sleaze stuck to like fly droppings. My father was not really a leftist, more a liberal-minded conservative with a penchant for social democratic jaunts and a strong sense of justice. He went on demonstrations against the NATO Double-Track Decision, and when the nuclear reactor at Chernobyl blew up on April 26, 1986, he saw the apocalyptic visions of the Club of Rome and the Cold War coming true, as did many others at the time. It wasn't like we constantly talked politics at home. But these core beliefs, I picked up there.
When I was in eighth grade, I started developing my own political consciousness. At first I got tremendously worked up about all the injustice in the world. It was simply everywhere. Children in Africa had nothing, while we had three computers to play with. We had more than enough, and yet there were those idiots here in Germany who were not prepared to give up even the slightest of their petty wealth for those who had nothing. Instead they would set fire to refugee homes and even kill people – people who wanted nothing more than to live in safety. Complete madness! In addition to that, our ecosystems were near to collapsing, just because our rich industrialized countries were ruining everything. The United Nations Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro in 1992 succeeded in ratifying the Climate Framework Convention, but it didn't go far enough for me, of course. And then all that lunacy in former Yugoslavia. 1995: the massacre of Srebrenica. Injustice! Wrongdoing! Everywhere! It was only in South Africa that justice seemed to have prevailed. The fact that someone like Nelson Mandela, who had found out in the most painful ways possible what the struggle for freedom could mean for his personal life, had been elected President was inspiring. It gave me reason for hope.

Teenagers like to think about the big picture, the big questions of meanings and systems. Just as their own biological system is being called into question during puberty, the outer system is constantly being questioned too. But remnants of this (admittedly juvenile) aversion against structures and systems stay with me till today. Fascist pigs! Fuck the system! Yeah!

For the time being, my rebellious attitude was more than enough for me to understand the perfidy of the entire system. But this was the beginning of the supreme success story of the Internet. And I wasn't missing out on that, of course! First I whizzed through the network with a modem with a bit rate of 14.4 kilobits per second, but soon after that I upgraded to a hyper-fast 56.6 kbps. Incredible! Whenever I hear that inimitable dial-up sound of an old modem, the fascinating croaking and humming, I start to glow out of sheer nostalgia even today. Ah, the good old days. I always was and always will be a hardware nostalgic.

The unlimited freedom the World Wide Web offered was what I had always dreamed of. What we had dreamed of, sitting there all over the world at the ends of those telephone lines. The mailbox systems had only been the beginning. The real party didn't start until the second half of the nineties. Which brought higher capacity servers, affordable high-end computers, and ever-faster data connections. But already, the first of the Web's users were receiving takedown notices from lawyers because they had ignored copyright when posting images on their home-made websites. I didn't understand. I saw the net as a place of freedom, free of the pervasive bourgeois system and its rules, which I took to be an attack on net freedom altogether.

When an imprint was made mandatory for German websites, I knew this did not bode well. I sensed that there was worse to come: the Internet that I knew would be conquered by a world that I detested. It was the beginning of the end. Still, I was ready to take up the fight. I finally understood what I had kept all that anger and resistance for. They were the foundation that would help me to become active, to take action, in the German Pirate Party, with Telecomix, and more.

But I was still on my own – though that didn't stop me from rebelling against the impending loss of fundamental Internet freedoms. The Internet became my Wild West, and I played the role of the outlaw. An outlaw just like El Cattivo. I have always loved role-playing games. So I started developing new characters and plot lines for my favourites, and even wrote the matching source booklets. I would upload these to the Internet so that other players could enjoy them as well. The games publishers hadn't authorized my creative enhancements, of course. And I certainly hadn't asked for permission. Nowadays, that sort of thing would probably be referred to as copyright terrorism. On my own websites, where I acted out my love of Star Trek by endlessly posting screen caps and set photos (that I didn't hold the rights to), the obligatory imprint said: Frank Rose. 100, Riot Row. Hanau.
An Educated Punk

Reading, technology, computers, politics: All these interests did help me in school, up to a point. I was not a particularly good student. I was lazy, and simply too obstinate to work my way through the materials offered. But what I learned in my spare time at least let me do pretty well in German, English, history and politics classes. Why should I have cared about integrations, though? I saw little sense in it. That is also why I, the alleged super-nerd, was never particularly good at maths. I never strived for higher levels of mathematics than were necessary for my programming. I couldn't stand it when I had to learn something that was set before me, even though I saw no point in learning it.

The teachers, in turn, couldn't stand my rebellious attitude. Most of the staff must have heartily disliked me. I was a rather difficult student, after all. Not one of those yes-men, but a loud-mouthed smartass, openly seditious, and constantly speaking his mind even while risking his neck doing so. In ninth grade, the indifference to school matters that I had so confidently displayed became my undoing. I was held back a year. And because I'm never one to do things by halves, I had to repeat the tenth year as well. My parents thought it was the end of the world. My mum wouldn't speak a word to me for weeks, which was just as well, I thought. I loathed her attitude, which basically said everything should go just the way she had imagined it would for me: school, college, family, work, family home, death. It was obvious: I was supposed to become one of those middle-class zombies, well-adjusted, assimilated.

To be honest, the behaviour I developed in those recurring conflicts with my parents was truly abominable. I tested out my limits, cried out my anger and frustration, and still thought the world of myself at the time.

It was not just my laziness that caused my school career to fold, but also my new friends. Yes, I had finally found friends. They were from the Hanau punk scene. These were real punks, they wore tattered skinny jeans, shabby, rivet-studded leather jackets, brightly coloured combat boots and messy mohawks. I liked their attitude, which can be summarized as follows: No future! Fuck Nazis! Smash capitalism! Work sucks! Gimme a beer! I also liked this unapologetic stance of refusal. One of the punks was called Mike. He was a vegan, and from a middle-class family like me. "You know why I like to drink beer, Stephan?", he asked me as were stocking up on a couple more six-packs. Smartass that I was, I said: "Sure – beer is vegan". He gave a snort of laughter and could hardly stop. "Vegan, vegan... Beer's vegan!" He pranced around the bus stop. That was what education meant to me: lived experience.

But education of the prescribed kind wasn't very high up on our list. So I increasingly played hooky from school, with the known results. Most of the time, we would just hang around at the Hanau bus station. It was a seven-minute walk from there to my school. But our beer supplier, the HL-Markt, was only five minutes away. That also simplified my decision-making: Punk or school? We drank beer, lots of beer. We sang punk songs. We raged about all the injustice swamping the world. At the time, the war in Kosovo was raging. NATO was bombing Serbia. And even the Greens were playing war games. There were more than enough reasons to declare war on the world. To ward off the headaches known to arise from such sheer injustice, we drank more beer.

There was just this one problem: After having repeated a school year twice in a row, I was no longer allowed to go to school in Hessen. Double dropouts were not regarded kindly here. They didn't live up to the standardized expectations of the smug, €ppelwoi-drinking meritocracy. "So what are you going to do now?", my mother asked when I told her the bad news. I just stood there in the kitchen, where a dull light was shining in through the window. Even the sky was in mourning.

Yes, what next? At least I already had my secondary general school certificate. But even back then, that was just a straight path into oblivion. And I didn't want to start an apprenticeship. I was not quite ready...
was just a straight path into oblivion. And I didn't want to start an apprenticeship. I was not quite ready to face the seriousness of life. Of course, I could have become a full-time punk. I did fancy the idea. But I dismissed the thought of it at once – I could never have done that to my dear father. Because I had absolutely no idea, my parents came up with something. The atmosphere at home had been strained for days. I had been holed up in my room, idly surfing the Internet and drinking my secret stash of beer, when I heard a knock at the door. My parents were standing in front of my bedroom door like two cops who are about to say something terrible has happened. "Stephan", my father said in a serious voice, "we've decided that you will go to boarding school, in Heidelberg". I looked at my parents and swallowed the lump in my throat.
Mother's Dying

Boarding school was the epitome of boredom. My classmates were snobs and upstarts, the spoilt brats of politicians, officials, teachers and entrepreneurs, who had made it their life's work to amass as much money as they could and show off with it. A pitiful lot. I did get better in school, at least. I finally completed tenth grade, which gave me my general high-school diploma, and finished the eleventh too, all in one go. To my own surprise, it didn't cost me too much effort. School was boring and remained that way. But that hardly bothered me. I just wanted to get it over and done with. I copied my homework almost verbatim from the Internet. My teachers never noticed. They were still living in the Valley of the Clueless: offline. In the end, I was allowed to return to school in the state of Hessen, which is exactly what I did for the school year of 1999/2000. The ghastly boarding school years were over at last. I passed my Abitur in 2001 at the Georg Christoph Lichtenberg Gymnasium in Bruchkšbel, halfway between Nidderau and Hanau, with an ease that still amazes me... Because at that time, something happened that turned my world upside down.

So far I haven't had much to say about my mother, and for a good reason. Even now I find it difficult to write these lines about her, to peel them from my fading memories. For I have suppressed the memory of her, too, locked it away in the catacombs of my mind. For the first six years of my life, she was the best mom in the world. I felt protected. I loved her, and she loved me. Just like it's supposed to be between mother and child. But then an evil spirit grew inside her, and she turned into a demon. My loving mother turned into a tyrant who wanted to control my life, and our family's. I had to justify myself all the time for what I did. Or for what I didn't do. Year by year, bit by bit, it got worse. She would become upset over mere trifles, rage and scream out her anger. Her shouting was the soundtrack of my middle-class youth. I fought it with punk and metal music, and by withdrawing into my own world on the Internet. But increasingly she directed this anger, which had suddenly exploded inside her like a water balloon, against me, against my brother, against my father. And when she ran out of words, she would hit me. She hit me. I just could not cope with this change in her. I didn't understand. And I didn't want to understand. After all, she was my mother. And mothers don't do that kind of thing. My father was overwhelmed by the situation as well. He let it happen and said nothing. We all suffered immensely from these constant tantrums. Probably my mother suffered, too. And so we all retreated into our own lives. The entire family suffered, it withered like a tree lacking water.

Then, in the spring of 2000, they found a large tumor in my mother's head. This was it, the evil spirit that had transformed my mother into this cold monster. I understood that, and at the same time, I didn't. All those years under her tyranny had been too painful. Eventually the tumor was surgically removed, and my mother turned back into the loving mom I had so badly missed all that time. The next few months would be a time of happiness and harmony. Our family flourished. For a while. Then she died – on December 15, 2000, not long before my Abitur exams.

I could not cry over my mother's death. As much as I tried to. All night I lay in bed, staring into the dark, wondering if it was morally acceptable, not crying when your own mother had just died. Life in the past years with her had been hell. But I felt remorse and guilt as well, for not being able to mourn over her as a son should. I didn't understand the ambivalent feelings rushing through me. Those damn feelings you couldn't programme like a computer.

My father was literally crushed by my mother's death. Hardly a day passed when I didn't see him cry. He barely spoke, sat silently in that home he had built for his family, which had now lost a life. My father had loved my mom, after all. But had I? I find it very difficult to tell. Whenever I think of that time with her, I can feel the anger in me rising all over again. In my mind, I understand that the tumor was the root of her change in personality. But the pain she hammered into me with her shitty behaviour just sits too deep, even today.
It was my father's state that really made me sad. I felt heavy as an anvil. I wasn't exactly clear-headed; in the weeks after her death, I was drunk more often than I was sober. In this state of confusion, I had to take my school finals. The school board had offered to postpone my Abitur by one year due to the "exceptional circumstances". I declined. I had to go through with it, no matter what the cost. Another year in the educational penitentiary would have turned me into a zombie for good. So I revved up my displacement mechanisms, switched the engines to full throttle, and got myself an Abitur.
I had never thought about what I wanted to be when I grew up. I was a talented misanthrope. But that skill wasn't in great demand on the German labour market. As a child I wanted to become a farmer – the country life of my grandparents, with their own cow, chickens and pigs, seemed attractive to me. But later on, I would develop this aversion to nature. So farmer seemed out of the question as a profession. I decided to take it slow and go on holiday first. Fifteen years of school rigour and drills had left their marks. How could anyone make sensible decisions like that?

For the time being, I stayed at home, living in the basement and honing my digital skills in the daytime, and working at the Black Inn at night, the oldest rock and metal pub in the entire state of Hessen. The pub was located in the small town of Ranstadt im Wetteraukreis. My place was behind the bar. The music banged and blared and clanged away, subduing those dark and sullen thoughts of mine. And I made sure they never came to the surface by downing huge amounts of alcohol. I liked that state between wakefulness and sleep. I went through the world intoxicated, intoxicating myself against the world. It was so noisy there that I had to shout all the time. That's how I learned to employ a certain tone of voice in order to get what I wanted – a skill that would prove particularly useful for me later on, at Pirate Party gatherings. The second talent I developed behind the bar was how to please or get rid of dissatisfied customers. Then I got a letter from the Kreiswehrersatzamt, the German Army conscription service. I had forgotten to submit my refusal. I did not approve of killing people and playing war games. But I was conscripted all the same, and ended up in a barracks in Tauberbischofsheim: the Siberia of Baden. Gentle hills, rolling pastures, charming villages with oversized village churches – an absolute nightmare. But I was lucky enough that my room mates were a few German-Russians, who had taken on the responsibility of maintaining an adequate supply of stupefying liquids. “This is Samagon, Stephan”, Sascha informed me, holding up a plastic bottle like an altar relic. “It is holy water. My father makes it himself, and he learned it from his grandfather, who in turn learned it from his father. Siberia flows in this liquid. The soul of Siberia. It will make you a better person.” I didn't want to be a better person. But I liked the moonshine. And so we drank whenever we found the time, which was pretty often.

It was only a matter of days before I began to hate the bleak barracks life. Taking orders, executing orders, being shouted at, crawling through the mud, and running around the countryside with a backpack. Definitely not my thing. I became increasingly obsessed with the rules and regulations of military life, and turned into a rules nerd, which bugged the NCOs in particular. “Is that what you call clean, Urbach?” the officer yelled, pointing at my combat boots during one of those cleanliness checkups. “Now the whole bunch of you will polish your boots again. And shiny clean, if you please, good enough for me to lick them.” The NCO guffawed. But I knew for a fact that collective punishments were prohibited, and that was exactly what I told him. And so it wasn't without some pride that I emphasized my case. “Oh, Urbach”, the NCO mumbled, and left. They couldn't stand smart-asses like me there one bit.

But perusing the rulebook of military life soon started to become boring too, and so I started calling in sick. Every single day. One day I had a migraine, the next day it was back ache or knee problems. I was carted from one medical specialist to the next. I kept this up for a few weeks until they finally sent me home. A few weeks later, the discharge papers arrived by post. I was free again, and so I signed up for the summer term at the University of Frankfurt. I had decided to become a teacher, for German and history. I was good at explaining things out loud, something else I had learned from role-playing games. My father was pleased with the decision as well. And I did mean it, in fact. Of all the lousy teachers I had seen act out their own frustrations in secondary school, there had been two whose classes had actually been enjoyable. The ones that had stood out were my history teacher and my German teacher. They had both managed to make their lessons lively and entertaining as well as
German teacher. They had both managed to make their lessons lively and entertaining as well as informative. My father was impressed. Finally, his son was following a serious life plan of sorts. And so I did, for a couple of months I attended my lectures and seminars, drinking gallons of vending machine coffee. But soon I became convinced that my fellow students were not studying in order to better understand the complexities of the world, to enrich their teaching with what they had learned, and then maybe teach their own students the advantages of an independent, self-determined life. Everyone just wanted to get their Scheine – their term paper credits; then, take exams, get a degree, get a job, make money, start a family, retire... It was like my parents' life. The German-middle-class way of life, the path all laid out in front of them. A life that was meaningless and boring in my eyes. Most of my fellow students were like hollow shells, I found, drifting through the world like ghosts. Frustration set in. Once again. The emptiness started rising and swirling around in my mind. Once again. Forget about university, Stephan, an inner voice commanded, speaking from that ocean of darkness inside me. Forget your studies.

"If you're fed up, you should just let it go. If you haven't got the right attitude, you can't do the real thing anyway." Easy sucked on the joint and exhaled a cloud of weed with a puff. We were hanging around on the couch at his place in Hanau. An apartment that for some reason had eight corners and smelled of stale air and coal cinders. Easy and I had met in a bar. He was a bit older than me and worked as an archivist in radiotherapy. He was no nerd, for sure, and computers weren't really his thing either. But we got along fine, maybe because he was one of the few who, like me, had cultivated a certain contempt for the world and for the plastic people in it. For the next ten years, Easy would stay my friend. A true friend, someone I could laugh away the frustrations of everyday life with. We really were close. There was a certain sense of ease between us, nourishing our friendship. Something I had never experienced before. We simply understood each other, with and without words.

Probably Easy was the reason why I was increasingly neglecting my screen life, while starting to explore my social life. I was reaching out to the world. I began writing concert and CD reviews for Gothic World magazine, and organizing festivals and concerts. My studies now existed only on paper. To appease my father, I didn't break off the course altogether. He really was worried about me. But I wasn't worried. I was young and on a roll. The future was a promise that held little in store for someone like me, who didn't have particularly high expectations of this life anyway. It was enough to destroy the present.

But it was the Internet I felt at home with, more so than with the world around me. It was a space that asked no questions, that demanded nothing of me, a place where I could let off steam. Day and night, I would play text adventures on the Internet. I even began programming a MUD engine of my own (which hasn't worked right up till today). I had long given up studying. But I needed a job, a proper one. My father was not only tormented by grief, but by his own worries too. I could see the anxious look in his eyes when we sat down together at the dinner table, the way he looked at me – pale-faced, questioning, perplexed. So I had to go find myself a job.

"Hey, look at this, Dad", I said, proudly waving a work contract under his nose. He took the paper, read the first lines and looked up in surprise. "Are you sure?", he asked incredulously. "Yes. I'm sure", I said. "It's a rock-solid job, with lots of training and career opportunities". He gave me a composed, but slightly stunned look. "Well, if you're really serious about it", he said. I was very serious. I wanted to become a banker.

So I started my bank apprenticeship at the Taunus savings bank in Bad Homburg. And though I was a smart kid, I was 25 years old by now. The Rhine-Main region around Frankfurt is a place where appearance counts more than essence: cash, titles, cars, property. The kind of game you have to play to a certain extent, if you don't want to end up on the streets begging for every cup of coffee. And so I played along. After all those years of rebellion, I relented.
Easy collapsed laughing when I told him about my decision. "What, you? A banker? I'm cracking up..."

His laughter was contagious. We filled our coffee cups, drank and laughed and laughed some more, until the early morning. That was about the time I discovered laughter to be a very effective method of dealing with unpleasant contemporaries and the absurdities of life in general. Even today, the giggles still come easily to me. I can't help it. It seems to be a built-in feature. From one minute to the next, I can start laughing and laughing until my stomach muscles ache. Laughter is an antidote to all the poison we are served up every day. Of course it only took a few weeks for the usual doubts and torments to reassert themselves, but I hung in there and completed my vocational training. A decision I do not regret until today. In the end, this was how I got to know the ugly face of capitalism: bond options and interest trading. Financial advisers are under constant pressure to meet certain economic data targets, and so they sell their clients contracts they hardly understand themselves. But I preferred to concentrate on foreign guarantees and credit briefs. In that way, I had nothing to do with the customers. But this was also a complex, fascinating business field, one with its own strange idiosyncrasies and rules, and a vernacular of its own. After all, strange languages were something I knew all about. After completing my training, I also worked in the foreign trade department. But not for very long.

So why had I spent all those years sitting in the basement, immersing myself in the rules and codes of the digital world, learning programming languages? It was never my goal or desire to work as a computer scientist. After secondary school, I wouldn't have dreamt of studying computer science. Computers and the net were primarily a pastime for me, a refuge from everyday life, a means of escape from the dreary existence I so detested. On the net, I met like-minded others, exploring a space that seemed infinite to me, where nobody tried to impose the kind of rules that I loathed everywhere else too. It was simply my world. Or so I thought.

I didn't fancy being a bank clerk until my dying day. Which is why I jumped at the opportunity when an acquaintance of mine offered me a job with ADTECH, a subsidiary of the Internet giant of the day, AOL. As a project manager, I was responsible for the planning and realization of digital advertising campaigns, but also took care of customers. I had a job in the heart of "Mainhattan". My father was pleased.

But the customary tension inside wasn't long coming. Sometimes it would subside. Those were the moments when something like contentment crept in, when everything felt all right after all. As if everything was going well. Brief waves of happiness. But then it started to raise its head again, that restless beast. It started with a hollow, nauseous sensation, like a hangover. Like waking up after a night of binge-drinking. The feeling would spread out into my arms and legs, making them tingle, until it finally flooded the brain. As if someone had injected you with poison. I was at war against myself. The antidote? Diving into the world of bits and bytes. Coffee, cigarettes, alcohol. Anything that distracted, filled my mind, numbed the senses. "You really have to find some peace", Easy said, when once again, I had hardly slept and had been at it for three days, with my head roaring like a high-speed data cable. Words and images, news items and bits of code were whirling through my head, without ever settling into some form of coherent knowledge. "If you keep firing yourself up like that, you'll overheat... and burn out quickly." I didn't understand what was happening to me. I just wanted to get rid of this terrible restlessness.

It's good if you are on fire. Most people just glimmer away like a discarded cigarette anyway. But Easy would turn out to be right. At the time, though, I thought his sermons were the pinnacle of pedantry. "You sound exactly like my father", I snapped, grabbed a beer, drained the bottle in one go, and ran out into the dusky streets of Hanau. I ran and ran, past the old houses with their facades painted black by the night, my heart beating, my head screaming, my legs aching, my lungs burning. In the end, I lay down in the middle of the street. I could feel the cool tarmac beneath me, and just lay there looking up at the stars that seemed particularly bright that night, lighting up the solitude of the universe. I closed my eyes
stars that seemed particularly bright that night, lighting up the solitude of the universe. I closed my eyes and fell asleep.
How do you find your place in life? What do you do when you don't find it? And when you've found that place how do you know it's even the right one? After several years of hanging around, in 2008, a part of my life began where the threads of my biography were finally coming together, converging towards a common point. At last, I would get some answers to the question of all questions: What is this all about anyway? And what kind of role am I playing in it? Because that's what life really is all about: asking yourself which role you want to play in this society. Without subjecting yourself to the risk of going insane in the long run and seeing unidentified flying objects on a sky of promises.

The early 2000s were not a good time for someone who was convinced that freedom should be the foundation of social coexistence: September 11, the Iraq war, new fears of terrorism. The anti-terror laws of the German federal government further cut back individual liberties (which had already been slashed successively in the course of legal battles against left-wing terrorism since the 1970s), giving the state and security services ever more opportunity to stick their noses into the private matters of respectable citizens. It was enough to make me angry, livid even.

From 2008 onwards, mobile phone and land-line operators alike were obliged to store all phone connection data for a period of six months. On January 1, 2009, new guidelines for the disgraceful Data Retention Act came into effect, which were, admittedly, overturned later on, but continue to attract a stream of conservative politicians, who even today will pull these directives out of the voting hat at every opportunity. From that point on, Internet service providers were also required to save six months’ worth of data about who was sending whom emails, and which users had connected to the Internet for how long. In addition, law enforcement agencies were entitled to confiscate logfiles and force providers to hand over information on who had visited which websites when. Already by 2008 it been revealed that the German Telekom had been digitally monitoring various journalists and employees.

For those who understood the Internet as a space of hope and longing, these were frightening developments. This wasn't how I had imagined the future of the Internet, the self-regulating space that I had come to know and appreciate. All this was taking place, ostensibly, in the name of protecting those democratic freedoms, hard-won from the demon of autocracy since the times of the French Revolution. And these freedoms are the foundation of all social and individual existence in a liberal democracy. This is something we never should forget. Even if democracy can seem tedious and arduous at times. But our liberty is not at all self-evident. It did not fall from the sky. It was fought for. And we have to continue to fight for it, every day. Even more so in a democracy, which has to fortify itself against autocratic structures. Which again will only succeed if we hold our civic liberties in esteem, and are prepared to defend them. Against anyone and anything.

I am not only talking about political freedoms, but about the kind of liberty that guarantees we are able to develop and live our lives as we see fit. And the same attitude should guide us in all our dealings with our fellow human beings. Democracy needs the freedom of dissent, too, the freedom to be different – that spirit of resistance that the younger generation usually develops. In this manner, a true democracy is constantly obliged to rectify and readjust its civic liberties.

Preserving liberty by restricting it? That's never worked before. The discussion about watch lists for child pornography on the Internet, which picked up in 2008 throughout German politics and society, was my personal last straw, politically speaking. Of course, no one could possibly approve of child pornography. But handing this dubious toolbox to law enforcement, enabling them to block all kinds of websites by way of flimsy and opaque allegations, meant effectively censoring those websites. I took this to be extremely dangerous, and completely undemocratic. Fundamental rights, such as freedom of information, were endangered here. For me, it was reminiscent of George Orwell's 1984. At the time.
of information, were endangered here. For me, it was reminiscent of George Orwell's 1984. At the time.

Today, I have a very different take on this novel. As I see it, Orwell wasn't primarily concerned with total surveillance. The book is about absolute power, gained through control. Surveillance is only one aspect of that. In his novel, Orwell created the perfect totalitarian state, which at the same time is the perfect constitutional state – a state where justice itself is unjust.

A generation of nerds suddenly found that the Internet, a space they had help shape and build for years, back when it was still hardly regulated and monitored, was in danger. And 2009 was the year in which the seeds of resistance against the dark machinations of governments, intelligence agencies and corporations on the Internet began to open up to the public. I followed these debates on the Internet, of course, joining chat channels to converse with like-minded people.

My political passion – anger even – had been sparked. For this debate touched upon so many of the things that were important to me: personal freedom, privacy, daring to be different, supporting dissent. For the longest time, it hadn't mattered what you looked like, on the Internet, how old you were, where you came from. It hadn't mattered whether you were Christian, Muslim, Atheist, male or female, white, black, yellow or red. In 1993, the New Yorker magazine printed a cartoon by Peter Steiner. You can see a dog sitting in front of a computer screen and apparently typing something. To another dog crouched behind him on the ground, it is saying: "On the Internet, nobody knows you are a dog". Over the years, this phrase became the favoured statement of belief among nerds.

This may sound exaggerated and pompous, but in the early days, this fundamental belief in the equality of all human beings was inherent to the Internet, this profound faith in reason that provided the foundation of its self-regulation. Today I believe it was the watch-list debate that showed me what was important in my life in the first place. In terms of personal interests and preferences, everything before that had always been clouded in a vague mist, but through the publicity of the debate, it finally received clear outlines. The issue gave me some idea of what I wanted to do in the future. So I decided to become politically active. Not least because I wanted to preserve what had made me the person I was at the time.
I'm A Mighty Pirate!

At this point, I had already been following the work of the Pirate Party for some time. It appeared to be the one party that was able to tackle the mounting challenges that came with digitalization. The political establishment simply didn't have a clue, that's how I saw it; politicians had no understanding of what digitalization would actually mean for liberal democracies, for our life together, for what that life might become in future. Those old parliamentarians in the Bundestag also had no clue about my life, my world that was already so inextricably entwined with the Internet. Of course, they had no clue about the technologies behind it either. A lot of them still thought the Internet was nothing but a gimmick for deranged teenagers, youngsters with too much time on their hands and mischief on their minds.

Even so, it didn't take long for me to notice that for the most part, the Pirates were technocrats, trying to find technical solutions for social problems. For problems that mainly concerned themselves. I also found the whole concept of “Everyone has to be allowed to join in”, or “We have to listen to everyone”, most disconcerting. This is not how you do politics. This is not how you make a political party work. But back then, I was full of enthusiasm for the Pirates. “Just my thing. Just my kind of party”, I thought – even though I had never wanted to be active in a political party before. Party – the word alone was enough to evoke images of Helmut Kohl's CDU, or even worse, the Bavarian CSU. And I shared my dislike of that outdated concept of the party with many, many others who ended up with the Pirates at the time, hoping to change not only German democracy, but the whole idea of what a political party was.

The first time the Pirates' regional association participated in the elections for the Landtag, the federal parliament, in my home state Hessen was in 2008, with limited success. The Pirates gained only 0.3 percent of the overall vote. But their election programme seemed impressive to me: protecting and safeguarding privacy, promoting transparency in democratic decision-making, promoting media literacy, fighting against online censorship, opposing data retention laws, online computer searches, and video surveillance. Everyone who moves about on the Internet should at least acquire some basic level of knowledge on how to protect themselves with the proper technologies. And the Pirates' comprehensive and pragmatic ideas were directly connected to the world I lived in, I felt. A world which, in 2009, also began to include Twitter. On June 14, 2009, I wrote my very first tweet.

Hi everyone. So. My first tweet. And already it's annoying me :(

I got used to Twitter quickly, and started to love the 140-character messaging service, that straightforward way of communicating with people around the world, somewhere out there. The direct, unfiltered dumping of random thoughts in the moment they popped into my head. Just get it out there, out of the system. On some days, I was literally tweeting by the minute. On other days, I would post news items, funny comments, sometimes just plain nonsense, babbling, confused emotions, soul-baring secretions. To date, I have sent off more than 90,000 tweets. I tweeted an average of 41 verbal expulsions per day for the past five years. My Twitter account is just one of the avatars I maintain on the Internet, it doesn't necessarily have anything to do with the real Stephan Urbach. These avatars are mere projection surfaces for different needs that I have: messing about, thinking about politics, being silly, snarky or particularly smart.

Through the mailing list of the Pirates' regional association, I had got to know a few Pirates from around Hanau. We agreed to meet in the local pub Brückenkopf. There were ten of us, two or three of whom were women. Nerds, all of them, most of them working in IT. They all had a thousand crazy
whom were women. Nerds, all of them, most of them working in IT. They all had a thousand crazy ideas, and were brimming over with commitment, with energy, with the conviction that they could save democracy, the Internet, and the rest of the world. We decided to found a district chapter of the Pirate Party. To attend the Hessian regional association's meetings, we would have had to go to Frankfurt. But we were more interested in local affairs. And so I joined the Pirate Party, membership number 2757. Our local branch was founded on June 30, 2009, in Hanau, and I became its first chairman. In the first few months, our political focus was on the so-called Public Private Partnerships that were practised in many municipalities at the time. The cities needed money, and so many public facilities, such as swimming baths, were leased to investors. These were supposed to operate the swimming baths and to pay the city money in return. But since the investors mainly wanted to make money, it often turned out that the municipalities had been ripped off. Our local group tried to organize a public petition against these PPPs. With info desks on the marketplace in Hanau, we tried to get word out about our political platform. I traipsed from door to door, talking to administrators, officials, the media, for the public to become acquainted with our cause. Then came our first great test of character, on September 27, 2009, which we passed quite successfully. In the general elections, our chapter gained a respectable 2.2 percent of the votes. My father was stunned: his son had a job, an apartment, a car, and now he was even becoming a politician. "Amazing how you've changed lately," he said when he came to visit. "Not that you want to become chancellor of Germany next... Anyway, your grandma certainly would be proud of you!" We both laughed heartily.

I didn't mind taking responsibility. I was ready to rearrange things, transform them, and I enjoyed standing on stage, speaking my mind. I could take stick, and I could dish it out. All of a sudden, I had so much energy and drive, as if I had been attached to a power source, 380 volts. The moment I woke up, my brain clicked into action and started glowing like a floodlight. Chatting, answering emails, a cup of coffee in between, one cigarette, two, three. More chats, more emails, phone calls, typing, getting things done, more phone calls, online, online, online. Forgotten to eat again, so it had to be another cigarette, chatting, sending mails, typing, my head rattling and rattling.

This accelerated life between work and party politics somehow turned me on. It crowded out that constant companion of mine, the emptiness and depression. I had never learned to fight this emptiness in any other way than by numbing it. That approach had been successful, briefly. Though in the end, it would always reappear, that emptiness, clouding and darkening my thoughts.

But how could I have learned a different approach? How could I learn to fight what was in fact hurting me? On such matters, there were no IRC channels on the Internet. That's how I developed the kind of lifestyle that would later become my undoing. And so the intoxication began. The spiral started spinning, and it was fun, lots of fun, for a while, spinning like a top through my day. Nothing like my mindless work at ADTECH, which was increasingly making my life difficult. Day after day, I did what I had to as fast as I could, and invested every minute I could spare in my new life as local party chairman. On top of that, I started working on ACTA, the so-called "Anti-Counterfeiting Trade Agreement".

The United States, the EU, Japan, New Zealand, Australia, and a number of other countries had already been negotiating this infamous agreement, designed to establish international standards against copyright infringements and counterfeiting, since early 2008. All this had been taking place behind closed doors, that is, without any transparent, democratic controls. This was truly exasperating to me, and to many other Internet activists all over the world. This grievance fuelled my rage against the regulators and administrators who were trying to use the technical possibilities of the digital revolution to curtail my civil rights, without fully understanding the rules of this changed world. Fortunately, some brave people published a number of secret documents from the ACTA negotiations through Wikileaks and La Quadrature du Net, so the world could get at least some idea of what ACTA was holding in store for them.

"ACTA is a monster, undermining our freedom," was a line from a song often sung at demonstrations back then. The trade agreement included obligations for Internet providers to monitor what users were
The trade agreement included obligations for Internet providers to monitor what users were doing on the Internet, what they were listening to, what they were reading, watching and sharing. It would be up to the content providers themselves to hand out penalties and assess their exorbitant losses. Border authorities would have the authority to search my laptop for "illegal" data – meaning not the infamous bomb construction manual, but illegally duplicated data, for instance music MP3s which I might have copied from a friend sometime. What digital copies had to do with the counterfeiting of brands that the agreement was ostensibly about, was still completely beyond me. But one thing was clear: ACTA had to be stopped.

And so I became the Pirate Party's ACTA representative. In that capacity, I travelled all over Germany, giving talks on ACTA, getting to know lots of other Pirates, and before I knew it, I had woven a close network of valuable contacts within the party.
In October 2009, I finally discovered a group that would influence my life dramatically: Telecomix. A friend of mine, who was also a Pirate and had been accompanying me on ACTA business trips, was sitting on the massive blue Rolf Benz couch in my apartment – a relic of my former middle-class life. I had inherited it when my father sold our family home. He had remarried in the meantime, and moved in with his new wife. My co-pirate and I both sat on the couch in my apartment, crouched behind our laptops, writing press releases, simultaneously typing emails and chatting to other Pirates, scattered all over Germany. We sipped our coffee, chatting to each other, laughing, babbling, debating. Suddenly, my friend said: “You should really join the channel of this group... you can find it at irc.telecomix.org. Port 6999. I think it might be just your thing.” “And who’s that supposed to be?”, I asked. “You’ll see soon enough.” I connected to the IRC server she had mentioned. “And the name of the chat room?”

“#telekompaketet”. I typed and pressed Enter. “Telekompaketet” is Swedish and simply means “Telecom Package”. This was the name given in 2009 to a number of framework agreements the EU was using in order to try to amend the Telecommunications Act. The legislative struggle surrounding these amendments was a tough one. Telecomix represented the demands of Internet activists and began lobbying the EU, in a very active and successful manner. For example, Telecomix created the initiative “Adopt A Social Democrat”. The campaign took off when activists began peppering Swedish MEPs of the Social Democratic party with emails, in which they laid out precisely what changes needed to be made to the Telecommunications Act. I liked the pragmatic style of Telecomix from the start. “O-hai”, I typed into the terminal of the Telecomix chat room. “I’m tomate, I’m with the German Pirate Party. I had been meaning to get in touch with you, about joining forces on ACTA.” tomate was a pseudonym which I had been using ever since my earliest days of online activity. I didn’t even have to wait three seconds for the reply. “Sounds good. I’ve already heard a lot about you.” The reply had come from Marcin de Kaminski, a Swede now known as the one of the founders of the notorious file-sharing network, The Pirate Bay.

“What is Telecomix?”, I wrote. The cursor started dashing back and forth immediately, as if Marcin had answered this question a hundred times before. “Telecomix is everything and nothing. It is the beginning and the end of the Internet.” Wow! That sounded lofty and mysterious – I liked that. My eyes lit up. Since that day in October 2009, I kept the IRC channel connecting to Telecomix open on my computer. The public channel was freely accessible. For conversations that only concerned the inner circle of Telecomix, we withdrew to special ops channels. If any disrupters and trolls interfered with our discussions, we trolled them back, for example by posting and debating images of cats and nothing else. I started following the Telecomix discussions regularly, and occasionally, I would take part in the debate. That is how I discovered that Telecomix was an informal group of Internet activists, internationally minded and well-connected. Apart from nerds like Marcin, people like the Swedish IT entrepreneur, software developer and Flattr founder Peter Sunde, the Swedish activist Peter Kullenberg, the Irish-Icelandic IT activist and politician Sm‡ri McCarthy, and the US hacker, artist and writer Eleanor Saitta roamed the channel, as well as some of the people from the French NGO La Quadrature du Net, which has been defending civil rights on the Internet since 2008. In later propaganda pieces, we liked to proclaim that there were “hundreds, maybe thousands” of us. But the core group was quite small, including not more than twenty to thirty activists. They understood Telecomix as an idea, as an infrastructure, as a working foundation of the free society and the open net, as a task force on the Internet, for the Internet.
Through the Telecomix news agency, which went under the name Interfax, I learned that the group had been founded on April 18, 2009, with the proclaimed goal of livening up the ongoing debates on the EU Telecommunications Act. The group had been very active, that impressed me. There was much less beating about the bush in general, compared to what was customary amongst Pirates. Ideas were not watered down. They weren't pruned and trimmed to death. They were implemented, in an especially practical and expedient way. One of the advantages of Telecomix was that the group was small, and consisted of "benevolent dictators". And if something didn't work out, you could always blame it on our superbrain mastermind: Cameron.

This was the kind of work that clearly needed excellent propaganda. And that was Telecomix' true talent. The first Telecomix video that I saw on the Internet immediately had me pumped. It was uploaded to YouTube on February 22, 2010. The title: "Telecomix Crypto Munitions Bureau". Footage of children, getting in line after a siren goes off on the playground, of airborne missiles, of men and women working old-fashioned machinery and bold-looking surveillance contraptions, made by the US Department of Defense. Clearly, one of the US propaganda films from the Cold War era. The whole thing is accompanied by mournful organ music and the deep voices of a choir. A female voice, robotic, distorted, proclaims the following message:

Hello. This is Cameron from Telecomix. Telecomix crypto munitions bureau works for the benefit of cipherspace. Cipherspace is the state of crypto anarchy. This means that your identity is anonymous as long as you stay protected. There are no identities or authorities in cipherspace, and it is not possible to enforce laws where there is no identity, or where there are no authorities. Today there are several threats to the inhabitants of the internet. The politicians of oppressive regimes in the east and in the west, in north and south, are imposing surveillance ... You can help defending yourself and your friends, yes, all inhabitants of the networks. By learning a few skills you can take control over technology. Telecomix munitions are currently developing and promoting advanced security devices, which can endure even the harshest forms of government or corporation surveillance.

I watched that video again and again. My head was boiling. My nerves were flickering like a strobe light. Wow! Wow! Wow! Those worn-out images. That voice worming its way into my ear. The pathos, which I really did find touching. And the message: "With the use of modern crypto algorithms we can use this fact to defend free speech and the integrity of both bots and humans. Information is nothing but numbers, numbers not governed by human laws, but by the laws of mathematics."

That pretty much matched up with what I wanted: the free exchange of data and information on the Internet. Data was supposed to be free. It was not supposed to belong to anyone. No one was meant to limit or otherwise influence the flow of data. So data had to remain free! "Consider everything you put on the net public," I would later say in an interview with politik-digital.de. "Privacy is what is in your head. But once that information gets into the network, it no longer belongs to you! This means that sensitive data generally has no business being on the net, whether it's personal information or the servers of insurance companies and hospitals."

Back then, I already sensed that Telecomix might become something of a home for me. But the time hadn't quite come yet. I was still travelling around a lot for the Pirates in all things ACTA. Meanwhile I was well-known enough to dare to take the next step. At the first Germany-wide Pirate Party convention, held in Bingen on the Rhine on May 15 and 16, 2010, I was elected as a member of the Pirates' Federal Arbitration Court. I had to give up my job as district chairman as a result – holding more than one official post was forbidden.
The Pirate Party self-conception included one of the first attempts ever made by nerds to use their elite technological knowledge in a way profitable to the democratic society. This was something that the hackers and the nerds, who had always seen themselves as outsiders and mavericks, had repeatedly failed to achieve up to that point. At the time, it was the human face of the Pirates that impressed me. Here were people who weren't trying to hide the fact that this wasn't the perfect party, but they were at least displaying the willpower to tackle some of the things that the usual gang of SPD, FDP, CDU politicians didn't really have the intellectual arsenal to deal with.

There was an atmosphere of change, like in the early Eighties when the Greens started out to transform, and even disrupt, German society and politics. The political establishment of the day had laughed at the knitting mums and bearded weirdos who were becoming parliamentarians. In just the same way as they laughed at us, the pale-faced, bespectacled aliens who had crept out of their dark, computerized holes to stir up a bit of a nuisance on the surface. But we felt so much more human than any of the old political pundits, with their bureaucratic German, their legalese jargon, their poker faces. With their clunky, outdated image of the world we were living in. We, on the other hand, we felt more honest, more truthful, that is, more superior than that. But were we?

My job at ADTECH was boring me so profoundly it hurt. The Pirates made sense to me. But ADTECH didn't make any sense. Or none that I could make out to be essential. It was good, having a steady income, having something to rely on, enabling me to pay my food and rent and car. But the work as such – managing advertising campaigns ... well, I was finding it increasingly difficult to find any meaning in that at all.

I would sit in front of the computer in my office, glaring at the numbers and letters on the screen, trying to hypnotize them: I wanted them to do the job without my help. I stared at them as hard as I could, summoning all of my telepathic powers, but those wayward symbols weren't about to move. My brain was simply exhausted. I got up and went over to the office window. Grey tarmac, grey houses, grey skies. There would be snow soon. A soft white that would cover the dirt and grey. As a child, I loved the way the snow crunched under my shoes, the way it softly embraced me when I dove into it. Sometimes I would lie down on my back the snow and bury myself in it until only my face was showing. I remember feeling safe and sound, covered in a snowy blanket. I reached for the window, opened it, and took a deep breath. The cool, damp autumn air filled my lungs. I stuck my head out into the drizzle. In fact, I already knew what to do: I had to get out, had to leave, had to move on. For far too long, I had just stayed where I was.
1. B-B-Berlin, Baby!

It's amazing how reliably fate will rise to the occasion, once you've decided to make a change. Most likely we do all live in the Matrix, controlled by some kind of superhuman beings.

Alex and I met at the first national Pirate Party convention. He was older than I was, wore his long hair in a ponytail, and was a nerd as well, of course. We got along well, and he lived in Berlin. I had already been to the capital several times, mainly because of ACTA, to meet fellow Pirates and attend conferences. Just like I was this time. We were sitting in Alex' apartment, idly drinking beer and chatting. I had had more than enough of the toxic Frankfurt Rhine-Main area, where the air smelled of fat wallets and faked lives. “Why don’t you come to Berlin?” Alex suggested. “You’ll have a lot more opportunities here. And get to know more people who think like you. The Pirates are here too. It would be a nice change.”

Berlin? I liked the idea. Not because I was such a frustrated provincial and digital native, not because I was desperate to discover the awesomeness of Berlin in order to pimp up my own miserable life, but because the city was an option that just materialized in my life around the end of 2010. Berlin held no promises for me. Berlin was not a dream. I needed a change of air, that was all. In any case, I lacked the financial means to travel around the world as I wanted to. So it would have to be Berlin. “And I already found you a job,” said Alex. “Well, that escalated quickly. Let’s hear it”, I said. “This online magazine for computer games is looking for someone to take care of on-site advertising.” Two days later, I had the new work contract in my pocket.

I went back to Frankfurt, and immediately handed in my notice at ADTECH. “Have you gone mad,” Easy commented on my plans. “The place is full of maniacs. What on earth do you want in Berlin?” “Let’s see”, I said. I didn’t really have a plan myself. “Let’s see” – that was the plan I knew best anyway. I was convinced: I could find something better than death almost anywhere, anywhere but here. After all, the famous Bremen Town Musicians knew what they were doing when they hit the road to Bremen as well. My father liked the sound of it too. “You’ll enjoy it. It’s been clear to me for a long time that you would have to go at some point”, he said, and gave me a big hug. I still get all fuzzy inside when I think about this moment today.

My car was sold quickly, but I kept my apartment for the time being. Even though I am constantly accosting the petty bourgeoisie, I am quite bourgeois myself in regard to comfort and security. Something about leopards and spots. As much as you would like to shake off that skin, cut it loose from the muscle and bone underneath. Middle class, once and forever. I found my first flat in Berlin using my connections. “Sure, we have a couch in our apartment to spare”, @herrschrat responded. I had met Thomas on one of my Berlin trips. He was younger than me and worked in an outdoor store. He shared the flat with two students, Sophi and Beckj. I wrote back: “Cool! I will be landing on January 2. Where do I have to go?”

On my last night, on New Year’s Eve, I went all out, once more. I had celebrated with a couple of friends in a metal pub in Hanau, saying my final farewell to the Hessian province. Bam! Get rid of your old life, push reset, and just start again. But unfortunately, life rarely works like a computer game. You are constantly dragging around all that stuff you've accumulated over the years. Piling up in your subconscious, taking up space, causing problems of storage and the soul.
fishing boat. The chaos in my apartment was rivalled only by that of my subconscious. Stacks of books, CDs and magazines were strewn about, piled up into teetering towers. There were crates all over the place, some empty, some half-packed with clothes, role-playing games instructions, pieces of hardware, and all my other bits and bobs. In the kitchen, a pile of dirty dishes loomed in the sink. These were last week's raviolis, if I was identifying the remains correctly. Interesting: Somehow I had managed to make my home the exact effigy of my interior world.

Leaving feels right and wrong at the same time.

So. Bags are packed. No shower though. It's gonna be a smelly trip.

Turning off the router feels strange.

Getting started in 80 minutes. Bye-bye Hanau, hello Berlin.

I started my journey at Frankfurt's central railway station. I walked through the red-light district with its gloomy drinking holes and gambling dens, with hookers standing around outside where the hobos sat around. Smashed beer bottles, vomit, half-eaten kebabs – pieces of evidence from last night. It had snowed. The layer of white had turned the whole neighbourhood into a darkly romantic landscape, surreal cinemascope like in a Tim Burton movie.

I had managed to find a lift. A family, mum and dad, both in their mid thirties, and two squawking kids, took me with them in their old VW van. I was too exhausted to be excited. I looked out of the window, my brain idling, and listened to the sound of the wheels on the motorway. It was snowing relentlessly. Cars were shooting past, flinging out slush in every direction. My eyes were getting heavier and heavier.

I am climbing up a stone tower. The tower stands alone in a bleak landscape, topped with an immaculately grey sky. The tower is incredibly high. It is misshapen, hewn out of rough grey stone. There are sharp edges poking out of it. Towards the tip, it gets narrower. I climb up a steep, rusty staircase. The higher I climb, the stronger the winds become, tearing at me as I go on. I avoid looking down, and climb on carefully. Step by step. Grip by grip. It is getting quite cold. The ladder is wobbling. My heart is pounding with apprehension. At last, I reach the tip of the tower. There is a platform with a small opening to one side, from which a steel girder is protruding out into the nothingness, like a diving board on the edge of a pool. I warily step out onto the girder. The wind is tugging at me from all sides, trying to make me fall. I brace myself against the threat of falling by keeping my body tensed, and keep moving intuitively until I have reached the end of the girder, until my toes are literally hovering over the void. I look down over the great plain below, where not one bush, not one shrub, not a single blade of grass is standing, where nothing is moving. I am reminded of the Nothing from the "Never-Ending Story". I know that I have to jump. I also know that I don't have to be afraid. If I concentrate, I will be able to fly. I take a step forward – and start to fall. Adrenaline is shooting through my body, my heart racing, exploding with fear. I am concentrating, I am concentrating. But I am not flying, I'm falling, falling faster and faster – and the ground is getting closer.

I woke up with a start, my heart beating wildly. What a nightmare! I pressed my forehead against the windowpane, cooling my head. By now it had grown dark outside. The trip must have lasted forever. But I had been asleep. In the pouring rain the car headlights were blurred into dancing blobs of light. The children were both sleeping. "We'll be in Charlottenburg soon," the driver said to me. From the Charlottenburg train station, it wasn't far to my new home, which turned out to be in one of those anonymous apartment blocks from the 1960s.

I rang the doorbell, and Thomas buzzed me in. When I came out of the elevator Thomas was standing in the doorway. "Come on in, man! Want a beer?"

Definitely! "My head is completely dried up from the trip", I said. Thomas grinned. I threw my bags on the ground in my new room, sat down on the couch, and dug my laptop out of its case. How long had I been offline? Just had to check what was going on in the world.

Thomas appeared holding two bottles of beer. "Hey mind telling me what the wifi is called?", I asked. To feel like I'd arrived, I needed Internet,
of beer. "Hey mind telling me what the wifi is called?, I asked. To feel like I'd arrived, I needed Internet, urgently.

"First have a beer, and settle in," said Thomas, handing me one of the bottles and giving me a look as if to say: "What an alien..." I took the bottle. "And the password?" I gave Thomas a provocative stare. That was something I was good at: provocative stares. Something the Pirates had taught me. That my behaviour might be interpreted as strange or offensive – the thought didn't even cross my mind. "Sorry, but if I am supposed to settle in, I just need it." Thomas set down his beer, grabbed his computer, opened it, and read the character-and-digit sequence of the password out loud. I punched in the code, and could feel the tension easing off with every letter I typed. In a few moments, I would be back in touch with the world. I needed my permanent online communications like others needed sports, or chocolate.

I stared at my Jabber client, then turned on the IRC shell, opened Twitter and logged into my email programme. I heard the familiar sound of notifications rushing in. The terminal command screen -r was my window unto the world. My IRC channels were blinking.

I moved over to #telekompaketet. All the Telecomix agents were there: jwalck, marcink, chrisk, fo0, etu, okhin, lejonet, mlowdi, alice, KheOps, neu3no, pettter, taziden, smari, n0pants, maradydd. And countless others whom I didn't know, who were now haunting the Telecomix channel. What had happened in Tunisia while I was on my way to Berlin? For the last two weeks, I had been thinking of nothing else. Since two weeks ago, my group at Telecomix had started to concentrate on Tunisia. Tunisia!
For Tunisia, the decisive day had been December 17, 2010, when Mohamed Bouazizi, a 26-year-old greengrocer, doused himself with gasoline and set himself on fire. This took place right in front of the governor's offices in the small Tunisian town of Sidi Bouzid. With this terrible act, the young college graduate had tried to protest against the despotism of the authorities, against the lack of perspective in his life, from which he obviously saw only one way out: death. The permit for his vegetable stand had been rejected several times, and his goods had been repeatedly confiscated by the police.

The same evening, there were already a few dozen people protesting in front of the governor's palace. The Tunisian government had issued a gag order, imposing a complete news blackout. The news of this bloody act of protest wasn't supposed to spread, and yet it did, like wildfire. In the next few days, the demonstrations started fanning out all over the country. There were increasingly violent clashes between police and protesters. Pictures of beaten bodies and blood-shot faces made the rounds on Facebook and on various blogs. In the end, the Tunisian government started blocking websites and restricting access to the Internet for the civilian population.

Since that day in December 2010, which was to become the trigger point for the Tunisian revolution, I kept up with events in North Africa regularly. I scoured the Internet for interesting blog posts and articles that could explain what was actually happening. What was stirring the people there? What did they want? After all, what did I know about this North African country?

Sure, Tunisia was where Western package tourists went to tan their big bellies in the sunshine. I knew that. But apart from that? In my dreary school years, Tunisia had not once been on the curriculum. More proof that most of the stuff you learn at school is useless. So in order to understand just a little of what was going on, I first had to fight myself through 40 years of Tunisian history. But I felt, and we at Telecomix did too, intuitively, that what these people were concerned about was not strange to us either: it was about freedom. I'm talking about the personal and political freedom of the Enlightenment – the freedom that has made us self-aware, emancipated human beings, able to use our brains to solve the complex problems of coexistence without constantly smacking each other in the mouth.

It had been mid-2010 when I started directing my attention to North Africa. In Egypt, on June 6, 2010, Khaled Saeed, a 28-year-old blogger and programmer, was beaten to death by two policemen. Khaled was sitting in an Internet café in one of the suburbs of the city of Alexandria when the police came in. First they demanded to see the young man's ID (the prosecutors would later accuse him of drug trafficking), and then all of a sudden, started beating him. They dragged him out of the café, and kept beating and kicking him for twenty minutes – until Khaled was dead. The two cops had smashed his ribcage, knocked out his teeth and broken his skull. Due to the extremely brutal physical abuse, Khaled's face was barely recognizable. A photograph of Khaled's disfigured corpse in the morgue that his brother had taken with his mobile phone and later published on the Internet, was publicized all over the world thanks to the Facebook group, “We are all Khaled Said”. This was how Khaled's death became a symbol for the crimes committed by the corrupt Egyptian police force, for the criminally crooked system of power Hosni Mubarak had established. This dictator had been ruling Egypt since 1981! Later, Khaled would become the face of the coming Egyptian revolution.

One thing was clear to me: Khaled was one of us, a Digital Native, someone who had used the Internet to attain just a little bit of the freedom that the Mubarak regime had denied him. He was no hero. But he was a young man, filled with hope for a better life. I heard about his death through the Telecomix channel, where the atrocious crime was discussed with fervour. This despicable murder made us all...
channel, where the atrocious crime was discussed with fervour. This despicable murder made us all feel sad and angry. It also hammered home for me just how life-threateningly important it was what we were doing: network security. The events that unfolded in Egypt after Khaled's death, would keep us at Telecomix occupied over the entire course of the year 2010. But current events hadn't taken over, not yet, they hadn't yet taken possession of us. For the time being, they were wafting about in the background of my life and work. They became part of the discussions that I was having with other Pirates and Telecomix people. The latest events in Tunisia had sparked my curiosity and interest in the entire region. I wanted to keep up with what, around the turn of the year 2010/2011, was finally coming to a head in Tunisia. Maybe because I sensed that something was happening that was greater than I was, and far more important.

Thomas was still staring at me as if I were an alien who had just landed on a strange planet after a long flight through space... “I just need to tell my friends that I've arrived safely”, I said to him. Back in my Twitter account, I typed:

hello berlin. am now in you.

I really was in Berlin. In a sense. In another sense, I wasn't in Berlin at all. My mind darted about, back and forth, somewhere between ACTA, Telecomix, and Tunisia. I found it difficult to form even one coherent thought. And the very next day, I would start my new job in a new environment. Thomas and I toasted each other with our beer bottles. As he was telling me that he had completely forgotten to tell his two flatmates, Sophi and Beckj, that they were getting a new room mate, I was already half reading the conversations on #telekompaketet, where new posts were pouring into the channel every few seconds. “Haven't you heard? Mohamed Bouazizi died in hospital from his injuries”, someone had written. Countless comments followed, many of which speculated that the rioting in Tunisia would now start in earnest. So Bouazizi was dead. A young man who had wanted nothing more than to sell his fruit and vegetables. A young man who had wanted nothing more than to just do his thing, without suffering from meddling authorities all the time.

“Incredible what's happening in Tunisia right now,” Thomas finally said, as if he had sensed what was on my mind. He was probably just trying to change the subject and get me to pay him some attention for a change, instead of my computer. I looked up. “Uhh, yeah. Incredible”, I mumbled, and added quietly: “And now this greengrocer is dead too.” “Looks like it’s all going to blow up soon,” Thomas said. “Come on, let's go and get some more beer. There’s a Späti downstairs. Those were the only two bottles I had.”

I unstuck myself from my laptop. We threw on our coats, put on our shoes and ran down the stairs. The Berlin night was freezing. The icy cold immediately took of hold my body. We walked across the street to the “Späti” – one of Berlin's fabled all-night convenience stores, which was brightly lit, like that place of longing in a depressing road movie. Thomas pushed open the door and greeted the young man behind the counter. Who interrupted his newspaper perusal, said “Hey”, and kept an eye on us as we walked over to the rows of six-foot refrigerators and shelves packed with chips, canned food and candy. We grabbed three beers each from the fridge and marched towards the checkout counter. Thomas gave the man a ten Euro note, and the cash register jingled. My friend pocketed his change and picked up his bottles. “Tunisia. Not again”, I said, pointing to the stack of newspapers on display. The Späti man nodded. “Yes, Tunisia. It’s terrible”, he said. “We’re lucky that that’s so far away from here.”
My first days in Berlin were rather unspectacular. I went to work. I would sit in front of the computer, drinking coffee and implementing advertising banners for the website of a gaming magazine. In the evening, I would take the rapid-transit train home. Blaring punk music on my headphones, shielding me from the city noise, from the mess of unfamiliar people. Ostbahnhof, Alexanderplatz, the Spree river, the Friedrichstrasse. I looked out through the windows of the moving train. Melancholy welled up. An almost violent flash of melancholy. I stared at the glowing display of my mobile phone. Then I typed a text message: “Fucking melancholy. Go home!”, and sent the SMS to myself.

The city over there, me over here. So far, I didn't have any ambition to discover the city. I had enough melancholy of my own stored up inside. I went home to my shared flat in Charlottenburg. We spent the evenings together, cooking, chatting. I would go to bed, get back up, go back to work, sit in front of my computer.

Far more exciting, and more important, was what was going on in Tunisia at the moment. I spent every minute I could spare in front of my laptop. This was where my social life took place, after all, the social life I had not yet found in Berlin. I read countless blogs and articles, and discussed them with my friends online.

Meanwhile, people were demonstrating on the streets in Tunis by the thousands. There were country-wide strikes. The faces of all the young people in the videos struck me, their angry, agitated faces. Although I had never been to Tunisia and most certainly had no idea what it was really like, living under an autocratic regime like that of Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali for the past 23 years, I could still empathize with the anger of these young people. I understood their anger at Ben Ali's party, the RCD (Rassemblement Constitutionnel Démocratique, or “Democratic Constitutional Rally”), which dominated the country. Their anger at rigid structures that didn’t fit them, at a system that denied them the life they had always hoped and worked for. Their anger at those who denied them the security that their life was governed by rules that you could at least rely on to some extent.

I had read that most of the protesters were young people. Many of them were unhappy because they were unable to find work. They were frustrated because they had learned that in a corrupt system, honest commitment has no perspective, because they never got the chance to move forward under fair or equal conditions. In a corrupt system, there is no open competition of knowledge and skills. One who has more money, better contacts, less qualms, will always succeed. Either you succumb to this shitty system, or else you perish.

Clearly, the younger generation was finally fed up with the old, corrupt elite, who had gotten rich at their expense and robbed them of their future. Unemployment rates, of young academics even, were up to 35 percent. Many were additionally demonstrating the food prices, which had risen dramatically at the end of 2010.

Eyes ablaze, I stared at the screen of my computer. I took another sip of coffee. It was January 6, 2011. My IRC channels were blinking. I switched to the Telecomix channel and started typing.

< tomate> So, I'm now living in Berlin. Nice enough here!

< marcin> Finally!
Glad to hear it, tomate. BTW, they arrested Slim.

What?

Seriously. They think he's one of masterminds behind the last #optunisia that Anonymous pulled off.

*sigh* Well let's hope they don't freak out and do something to him. But that was exactly what happened. Slim Amamou was almost beaten to death by the police, as we later found out. The security guards had kidnapped him. They wanted him to hand over the passwords to access his blog and his Google account. However, his mobile phone was smashed during the assault, so he wasn't able to provide the passwords, which were normally sent to his mobile phone.

Slim, arrested and beaten! I felt hot and cold all over. I stared at my computer and feverishly started looking for incoming information on the case. On January 2, 2011, activists from the protest collective Anonymous had launched their “Operation Tunisia”. A round of distributed denial-of-service (DDoS) attacks paralyzed various Tunisian government websites, including the Tunisian Prime Minister's website. The hackers replaced the official pages with protest statements of their own, adorned with the popular logo of Anonymous – the Guy Fawkes mask from V for Vendetta. The Tunisian authorities accused Slim of having coordinated this action, together with two other bloggers, Azyz Amamy and Eddin Kchouk, who had also been arrested. The latter were both members of the Tunisian Pirate Party, one of whose founders was Slim. On the same day, I sat down and wrote a statement for the Pirates. It read:

Pirate Parties from at least 21 countries around the world condemn the violent reactions of law enforcement directed at the Tunisian population, and the arrests and disappearances of numerous bloggers, artists, activists and dissidents in Tunisia.

Slim's sad story literally glued us to the events unfolding in North Africa. He had become well-known in Tunisia in 2010, and was now a prominent blogger and activist in his country. He made his living as an Internet entrepreneur. He had already once organized a demonstration against Internet censorship, which had briefly landed him in prison. It was also Slim who had revealed that the security services of the Ben-Ali regime had used Phishing attacks to acquire passwords, and gain access, to numerous private e-mail accounts and Facebook pages. Slim's Twitter handle, @Slim404, became a saw all over the country – a reference to the error message that appears on your screen whenever a Web page is unavailable. Internet censorship was already very tight in Tunisia. Websites like YouTube, Flickr, WikiLeaks, and even Amnesty International were frequently blocked, even before the revolution. “Error 404 – Page Not Found.”

Occasionally, Slim would get in touch with us at Telecomix. Just as many other Internet activists did. After all, we were an open group that anyone could contact any time. He wasn't one of our agents, but he was constantly looking for like-minded people he could discuss everything with, from technical questions to the role of the Internet for social and democratic change. So he had clearly come to the right place. For this was our agenda too: transparency, liberty, and equality for us – the inhabitants of the Net.

So Slim in fact, we knew in person. For me, an encounter on the Internet has always been just as real as a personal encounter in so-called real life. Insisting on that difference between the real world and the virtual world, I have always thought, is obviously nonsense. Because at the end of the day, at the end of the line, behind that faraway monitor, there is another human being sitting there, and not some
end of the line, behind that faraway monitor, there is another human being sitting there, and not some remote-controlled machine randomly hacking away at the keyboard. Other human beings who want to communicate their thoughts and feelings, via the Net. This is much the same as making a phone call or writing a letter – more or less everyone who grew up with the Internet thinks that way. Only those who have always seen the Internet as a mere playground for geeks and nerds, still insist upon this artificial division. Through our informal acquaintance with Slim, our connection with the events in North Africa developed a new quality. The way we saw it was: One of our own had been attacked. One of our own had been beaten up and arrested. One who was the age we were, who thought the same as we did. In the heated discussions after Slim’s arrest, it turned out that this was also seen as an attack against us, ourselves, our ideas. We had already realized the importance of the Internet for the demonstrators, for those who were rising up against the autocratic regime. The Internet gave these people a chance to establish a counter-public, bypassing the controls of state-owned media and security services. The Internet smashed the communication and information monopolies of these regimes. The Internet was the receptacle for all the information that the Tunisian regime wanted suppressed at all costs, everything the repressive rulers wanted to keep the lid on, to protect and further secure their powers. Information on cases of corruption, abuse and repression, on arrests and censoring attempts – all those little things that would prick tiny pinholes into the oh-so clean facade of the regime. These kinds of Internet activities spread like wildfire in Tunisia, fuelling the original civic uprising, bringing it to the boil, until suddenly, the “Jasmine Revolution” was ablaze all over the country.

Despite all those years I had spent on the Internet, now, for the first time, I felt that the Internet was truly relevant. Relevant in the sense that it could play an important part in overthrowing a political regime, in obtaining and implementing civic liberties. The outside world and the digital world seemed to be melting into each other, blending together to form a new kind of reality.

This was history in the making. For the country itself, and for all those who had worked in defence of the free and open Internet over the years. For the first time, European and US observers could watch a revolution unfolding, without having to rely on traditional media outlets’ gatekeeper and watchdog functions. You could read the local blogs, watch home-made videos, that provided immediate insights into the situation on the ground. Following all the action in real time got the adrenaline pumping through my body. Here I was, at times just simmering away in my middle-class life like an oil lamp, and it started to dawn on me that these events were making me feel just a little more alive. It might sound capricious, but yes, these events made me feel more alive. I loved the tingling of my nerves, the glowing of my thoughts racing around, braver and braver, faster and faster. I had never experienced anything like it before.

So here we were, in our comfy sitting rooms, in our sheltered Western world, while in Tunisia young people were fighting on the streets for what we already had. Who were being battered and bruised for their beliefs. It was clear to me that we had to act immediately, and display some moral courage. Everyone else at Telecomix was clear about that too. And so there was no further discussion. Just intuitive understanding. We were simply convinced we could make the world just a little bit better, with our modest contribution. This was what it ultimately meant, having a World Neighbourhood. In retrospect, this youthful sincerity with which we approached the revolutions all over the Arab world was even helpful. If we had waited, if we had taken the time to compile an in-depth policy analysis of what was happening, and had discussed the possible consequences of our intervention from all angles, we might have talked our ideas to death, paralyzed our enthusiasm, paralyzed our actions. Maybe we wouldn't have done it at all in the end. And that really wouldn't have helped anyone.

Back in 2009, during the turmoil following the presidential elections in Iran, Telecomix had already helped to distribute and disseminate information from dissidents over the Internet. Since the Tunisian government was now trying to take down websites and block access to certain blogs, we decided to preserve those endangered, critical voices, so that they wouldn't disappear from the Internet. In the language of the Net, this activity is simply referred to as “mirroring”. It's no big deal, technically. The
language of the Net, this activity is simply referred to as "mirroring". It's no big deal, technically. The contents of the blog is simply copied onto another server. In this way, the blogs are duplicated many times over. For example, we mirrored the the popular Sand Monkey blog. This wasn't some kind of heroic act, merely a necessity. We were as critical as ever of the operations that Anonymous was pushing at the same time. We didn't care about our public image. We didn't care about proving our technical and general superiority over Ben Ali's IT stooges to ourselves and to the world in a Cyberwar. The pragmatic element of support was far more important to us.

Obviously, these inconvenient truths and documents were causing the regime real pain. Otherwise they wouldn't have arrested Slim and the others. Otherwise the regime wouldn't have gone to such lengths to suppress uncensored blogs and news items, to filter them out. We wanted to give the people who were silenced the chance to tell their stories. And if that is no longer possible within a political system, then that system is clearly broken. In the end, our entire society is based on stories, millions of stories. And all of those stories have their value. All of them contribute, so that we can coexist within the same political system. Of course, stories can be manipulated, influenced in such a way as to convey certain messages, used to reinforce the powers that be. In a democracy, our stories can circulate more or less freely. In autocratic systems, however, our stories are silenced or exploited. And in nothing short of that, we saw our responsibility: to preserve and to disseminate these stories.

So Telecomix became something of a news agency for Tunisia. And that was only the beginning – the so-called Arab Spring had only just started after all. By now, it had grown as dark in North Africa as it had in the Kaiser-Wilhelm-Strasse in Berlin-Charlottenburg. 1:40 a.m. I was sitting on my couch, I checked the clock on my laptop for the second time. 1:40. Apparently. I had completely lost track of time. My coffee was cold. The apartment was quiet, unbelievably quiet. Even the noises of the big city at night had faded. The rest of Berlin had probably gone to sleep by now. My room mate definitely had. Thomas was fast asleep. If I concentrated, I could hear him breathing softly. We did live in the same room.

I was lying down on the couch. The IRC channels were still blinking wildly. My eyes stung, my hands were cold. But I was so agitated, exhilarated, I had to get back up. I started walking across the room. From the bookcase to the couch to the window, and back. Gently I took one step after the next, taking care not to wake up Thomas. I thought of Slim, of the bruised faces of the protesters, of the angry crowd shoving its way through Tunis, of the cops with their batons, of the anger, the determination, that I had seen on the faces of these young people. I felt nauseous just from the adrenaline. And still, there was this trauma of my own middle-class life. A trauma that I did not fully understand. Or had I just imagined all those dark and gloomy feelings that had been my companions since childhood? Maybe I was simply too well off? First-world problems? I was perturbed; I was overwhelmed – emotions I would soon get to know even better still.

I took off my jeans, took a swig of water, lay back down on the couch and stared at the ceiling, my head spinning. Then I switched out the light and waited for sleep to come, waited for it to switch out all the moving images and nagging questions in my weary mind.
4. The Madness Begins

It's early January 2010. Tunisia has by now reached a civil war-like state. Police and military have besieged the cities of Haffouz, Regueb, Thala and Kasserine. The militia are beating up protesters, and police are firing live ammunition at unarmed civilians. But the people are not to be discouraged, quite the contrary. The number of people taking their anger to the streets is growing. Ben Ali's police state is fighting back the escalating demonstrations with all the brutality it can muster. But resorting to violence is always an admission of helplessness. Ben Ali's time had come, that was more than obvious. The old dictator simply had no responses to the pressing demands of the young, who had lost their trust in him. These were the last twitches of a broken system. Like a wounded elephant, the regime twisted and turned in its death throes, taking everything it could down with it in one last display of strength. People died, a lot of people died. 219 people, according to a report by the United Nations Human Rights Council published in February 2011, would die until the end of the revolution. On the protest marches, people articulated their demand clearly enough: "Get lost, Ben Ali!"

Events started unfolding rapidly, just as I was getting used to my new life in Berlin, commuting back and forth between my job, the flat, and the Internet, wondering what was happening to Slim in prison. We had no information on where he was being held, and found that worrying. On January 12, 2011, the dismantlement of the old regime finally began: Two of Ben Ali's daughters had already fled to Montreal, and his wife was on her way to Dubai. Ben Ali gave a public address on television, in which he announced a policy move towards democratization and the abolition of censorship, and also implied that he would not run as presidential candidate in the elections again. This announcement was like a funeral speech. It seemed like Ben Ali himself had lost all hope that he could appease the demonstrators. On January 13, a number of protesters who had been arrested during the riots were finally released. Including Slim, who would later describe the experience of being interrogated by Tunisian police in an interview with the French radio station Public Senat: "Psychologically speaking, it was very difficult", he told them. "They didn't let us sleep. We had to sit, handcuffed to a chair. For five days. They pressurized us by telling us they would torture our family and friends. We heard the screams of people who were being tortured in the room next door, and we thought those were our families."

We at Telecomix were more than relieved when we heard that he was still alive, and given the circumstances, seemed to be all right, more or less. "Slim is free", I tweeted. "A good day for the Internet."

There I sat, in front of my laptop, looking at the sentence I had just typed, and was strangely moved by my own words. A weird feeling. I felt like a civil rights activist, like a dissident. Without actually having done anything. One thing was certain, I was not part of this revolution. Even so, the moment touched me. I could sense that in Tunisia, something historic had just happened. And thanks to the Internet, I could be present as events unfolded. I had never experienced anything as exciting in my life. I felt like in one of those adventure books I liked to get lost in as a child, those books that had catapulted me into unexplored territory and let me escape from my everyday life. How did Jerry Seinfeld once put it, "If I want to hear an endlessly boring and completely meaningless story, I don't have to read a book, I just look at my own life."

In fact, things would soon turn out to be even more exciting. On January 14, 2011, the time had come at last: The Ben Ali reign was falling, toppling to an abrupt end after 23 years. It was history in the making. The news tickers had new updates every hour. I had already been awake since six a.m., and had cajoled myself into an acceptably wakeful state with three mugs of coffee, when I read that the Tunisian Foreign Minister, Kamel Morjane, had issued a statement explaining that he thought a "government of national unity" possible. I set off to go to work, phone lodged in my hands, my eyes glued to the display.
national unity" possible. I set off to go to work, phone lodged in my hands, my eyes glued to the display.

I knew the way to my workplace in Friedrichshain by heart, so I hardly needed to lift my eyes from the screen. Otherwise, I might have missed a personal message, a notification, a tweet. Later that day, hundreds of thousands of people would take part in the demonstrations in Tunis. Other cities saw huge crowds of demonstrators marching through the streets as well. And again, the people cried: "Get lost, Ben Ali!"

When the army advanced with tanks in Tunis, the situation appeared to be getting out of control. But I was also hearing reports of police and military deserting and joining forces with the dissidents. Would Ben Ali cling on to his power? Even if that led to a bloodbath? People on the streets seemed ready for anything – even if that meant dying. When the Tunisian Prime Minister, Mohamed Ghannouchi, appeared in front of the press that night, he announced that Ben Ali would be resigning from office and that he, the Prime Minister, was planning to appoint a transitional government. But the situation remained tense. Shortly after that came the news of Ben Ali fleeing the country, probably to Saudi Arabia. "So he just took off, the coward," was how I commented the despot's departure in the Telecomix chat. And couldn't resist adding: "The people have prevailed. We've won ... :)"

That was exaggerated, of course. But the purple prose was my expression of the triumph I truly felt in that moment. I was glad that there hadn't been any more deaths. Another thing I was glad about, at the risk of sounding pompous again, was that the good guys had won. I was happy to see that the free and open Internet had proved its worth. And I enjoyed being part of a group like Telecomix. For the first time in my life, I felt at home in a group of people. For the first time.

I had brought some beer with me after work. Thomas and I were sitting around on the couch in our bedroom. The TV news were running on my laptop, showing images of the crowds celebrating in Tunis. We raised a toast to them. I felt strangely connected to these people. I felt like a revolutionary, like a tiny revolutionary who had finally crawled out of a Hanau basement. "I wonder if that's going to set a precedent down there", Thomas said, as Dietmar Ossenberg, news correspondent for the German public TV channel ZDF, assessed the situation in Tunisia on the telly. In early 2011, riots had started to break out in Algeria too. "Could be, I said, tersely, and took a swig of my beer. That night, I slept like a baby. I didn't dream, but I slept.

I had thoroughly enjoyed my days as a revolution helper; they had me virtually intoxicated. Of course, our contribution was comparatively modest. But it had been meaningful – something I couldn't say about my day job. I had to drag myself back to work. The hours and minutes seemed like an endless quagmire in front of me, which I kept plodding through, which kept pulling me back down into its muddy depths. Supposedly, there are people who are content doing meaningless work. Day after day, week after week, year after year. Until one day they are on their deathbed, and might even remember which all-inclusive holidays they booked, which cars they drove, remember that they owned several 52-inch flat screen TVs, that they even had a family home, cats and dogs, a seawater aquarium, a porcelain elephant collection, and edible organic flowers in their garden. But all that was of little interest to me. What I tweeted was: "You know what I'd like? An employer who pays me for activism, not for working."

At the time, no one could say yet whether the revolution in Tunisia would be a success. The country was in a state of emergency. In some places, there was looting. Prison inmates began rioting. But on January 16, 2011, it became public that Slim Amamou was to become one of the members of the Tunisian transitional government. He tweeted: "Je suis Secrétaire d’État à la Jeunesse et aux Sports :)" – I am the Secretary of State for Youth and Sports. This move by interim president Ghannouchi was obviously aimed to please the younger generation, the Internet users who had participated in the revolution via social media. The role of Twitter, Facebook, blogs and other online platforms was recognized, while the appointment of a prominent cyber dissident was supposed to be a mark of confidence that there would be no more censorship in future. A smart move from the "government of national unity". Getting the country back into working order would nevertheless prove difficult in Tunisia.
My own transition back into working order proved just as difficult. In the first few weeks in Berlin, I had almost no contact with the people back home. I called my father a couple of times. That was more or less it. Easy and my other friends: nothing. I didn't keep in touch with them at all. And so the fight against my dull daily routine continued. And it hurt. I really should have been looking for a place of my own, an apartment or a room in a shared flat. I was still living in one room with Thomas, after all.

Thomas didn't pressurize me to get out, which I give him great credit for today. Later, when the Arab Spring really took off, he showed an extraordinary amount of understanding. Seeing as I was just too lazy to get my ass off the ground. To be perfectly honest: I'm basically a lazy-ass slacker, which is not the best prerequisite for being a rebel.

A couple of times, I did start looking for a room on the Internet, but I had to break off my search every time a new reply came in to one of my chat channels. Finding a place to live could wait until tomorrow. Those were my thoughts, at the time at least – deeply selfish thoughts. Now I know: My talent of postponing actions that were actually essential, that brought about a change in life, and brought necessary relief to others, was world-class. And I worked best when I was suddenly confronted with reality, with facts I needed to act upon. When I was swept away by events. Constructing a life plan based on some imaginary blueprint wasn't my thing. I simply couldn't deal with it. That made sense for someone who saw no sense in life, who was doing everything he could to fight it.

But back then, I was in luck. These were turbulent times. And the next events that would carry me away were just around the corner. Once more, I found myself sitting in front of my laptop, watching a video on YouTube, which had been making the rounds on the Internet for some days now. Someone from Telecomix had alerted me to it, with the words: “Take a look at that. I think it's starting in Egypt too now.”

In the video, you could see a young woman wearing a striped cardigan and a headscarf. She was angry, very angry. She seemed to unloading all of her pent-up rage in this five-minute video clip. An anger that had apparently been building up for some time within. Her words and phrases came out clear and sharp, they sounded as hard as a flying brick. She was talking about Egyptian dictator Hosni Mubarak, who had repressed and degraded the Egyptian people for the past 30 years. Four Egyptians had set themselves on fire in protests in the past two days. One was an unemployed man from Alexandria, who had died of his serious injuries. Three others in Cairo could be rescued. The young woman in the video said that these men might have had the same hopes, to live in freedom, justice and human dignity one day. She said that she had gone to Tahrir Square in Cairo, with three other people, to call attention to these four deaths. She said she had tried to mobilize others as well. But instead of more protesters, only more policemen and regime henchmen had arrived, terrorizing and trying to discourage the protesters. These people had simply been psychopaths, the security forces claimed. “The national media are suggesting anyone who dies in a protest is a psychopath,” the young woman said. Then she called on her fellow Egyptians to join her for a demonstration on January 25, 2011, again at Tahrir Square. “If we have any honour and dignity left, we must take to Tahrir Square on January 25. We will fight for our civil rights, and for our fundamental human rights.”

I watched the video again and again, probably more than ten times. The ardent, confident words. The bright eyes of this young woman, which despite all the anger in them, had a deeply trusting look. Back when everything started in Tunisia, I had wondered before: How was it possible that the West kept supporting a dictatorial regime like this over decades? A regime that robbed its youth of its dignity, its perspective, its future? The same was true of Egypt. Dictator Mubarak had been a welcome guest in the United States, and was greeted as a state guest even in Germany, for the last time in 2010. The flimsy excuse of preventing fundamentalist theocracies under the banner of Islam, that these corrupt, Western-backed dictators liked to tout, all while enriching themselves at the expense of their country and their people, was indicative of the vile Realpolitik which we believed was securing our freedom, but which was in fact denying this same freedom to millions of others.
this very bad feeling in my stomach. I had another look at the video, staring into the eyes of this young woman, and yes, I felt guilty, I felt responsible for her fate. It simply wasn't fair. I was lucky enough to live in a democratic country, able to say and write whatever I pleased. But she had to live in a dictatorship, a stifling atmosphere that made it hard to breathe. But her belligerence, her courage and determination were impressive. Her desire for freedom, her energy and vigour were contagious, especially for someone like me who on most days felt more than half dead already. Her willpower was mindblowing.
The entire video was like a slap in the face. Bam! I sunk back onto the couch. “Wow! Wow! Wow!,” my mind was blown. After all these years of searching, I had finally found my heroine, my personal Alanna of Trebond.

Even Thomas, who had sat down next to me, was completely spellbound by the video. “Dude”, he said repeatedly, “How incredible is this lady”. This lady’s name was Asmaa Mahfouz. She was a blogger and a political activist with the April 6 Youth Movement. The group had been established in 2008, when workers in the industrial town of El-Mahalla El-Kubra went on strike, and activists of the movement started reporting on the strike and documenting the workers’ actions on Facebook, Flickr and blog websites. Asmaa was 26 years old. She had recorded the video and posted it on Facebook on January 18, 2011. From that moment on, it spread like a bug, a virus that would eventually infect hundreds of thousands, even millions of Egyptians, driving them onto the streets and onto Tahrir Square, which would later, in all its archaic savagery, become the symbol of the Egyptian revolution.

In the past, you would have had to print millions of leaflets to get that kind of turnout. Today, it only takes a few clicks to publish something like that video. On January 25, 2011, which oppositional groups and civil society initiatives had declared to be a “day of protest against torture, poverty, corruption and unemployment”, tens of thousands came to Tahrir Square, the town square in downtown Cairo that the whole world would be watching in the weeks to come. Inspired by the turn of events in Tunisia, the people were shouting: “Mubarak, go home!” On top of all those petty humiliations that the Egyptians had been forced to endure at the hands of the regime, there was also the high youth unemployment rate, the rising poverty and generally desolate economic situation that was sparking the protests, just like it had been in Tunisia. If you ain’t got nothing, you got nothing to lose. A youth bereft of its future, is an explosion waiting to happen.

The consequences of which the geriatric Mubarak, who at the time was already 83 years old and had the demeanour of a wax figure, would come to feel soon enough. Because now the people of Egypt were turning the state of emergency, which the Mubarak clan had ruled the country with since 1981, with the support of a strong military apparatus, around, turning it back against their president. And just like in Tunisia, the Egyptians were using blogs, Twitter and Facebook, not only to keep each other informed, but also to coordinate protests and arrange various meetings and activities. Mubarak’s security agencies had most likely taken a very close look at the role that the Internet had played in the Tunisian revolution. Even before January 25, Twitter had been blocked on the Egyptian Internet, as had certain Facebook pages, videos and services like bambuser.com, a streaming site protesters favoured for online broadcasts of their demonstrations. In addition, some activists had had their mobile phones disconnected or their contracts suddenly terminated. Never before in the history of Egypt had so many people demonstrated as on January 25, 2011. “This is just the beginning. Now the people will be unstoppable”, was how the German weekly Die Zeit quoted Hissan Saleh, a 24-year-old pharmacist who had taken part in the demonstration. “At last, the Egyptians have broken the fear barrier.”

At first, the state forces didn’t relent, displaying their power and their willingness to beat back the protests in Tahrir with water cannons, tear gas and police batons. But eventually, they backed off. There were simply too many demonstrators. The regime had already disabled the mobile phone networks and antennas around Tahrir Square in advance as a precaution. They were trying to prevent videos of the protests being sent out into the rest of world. So they had already factored that in – that thousands of people wouldn’t be able to place as much as an emergency call. And they simply didn’t care. All they cared about was preserving their own power. Never mind that countless other family members and friends were worried sick when their messages didn’t get through. Never mind freedom of expression.
friends were worried sick when their messages didn't get through. Never mind freedom of expression. Never mind human lives. The complete shutdown of mobile coverage proved to us at Telecomix that the regime was prepared to beat down this budding insurrection with totalitarian methods, otherwise known only from places like China and Bahrain.

< marcink> So it's happening. I can't believe it.
< tomate> What's happening?
< marcink> Mubarak has shut down the mobile phone networks. Vodafone confirmed it.
< mlowdi> What, they're cooperating? This can't be true, man.
< tomate> I can't believe it either. Sorry, but that's just madness!
< marcink> Yup. Madness it is. Not cricket anyway.
< tomate> And now, what's next?
< mlowdi> Lets hope not the tanks.

In order to block local access to Twitter and other online services, the regime in Egypt resorted to the comparatively simple method of DNS Blocking. So for instance, if someone tries to visit a blacklisted Facebook page, access to that page will be blocked if the server doesn't recognize the domain that this page is referring to, because the domain simply isn't available in its DNS. But this someone could still use a different DNS server, though. This is also a comparatively simple procedure. In Windows, you can reconfigure your DNS server with just a few clicks. Incidentally, this was the same cheap trick that Ursula von der Leyen, German minister for family affairs, used in 2009 when she kicked off her campaign to block child pornography websites.

Telecomix decided to explain to the people of Egypt how they had to modify their DNS settings in order for them to be able to use Twitter and Facebook again. We composed blog posts explaining the relevant technical details, publicised them via our Interfax news agency, and spread the word on all channels available to us. My nerves were starting to flutter again. After work, I would sit in front of my computer for hours, sending out tweets, typing, chatting, sharing links. My eyes were burning, my neck was aching. But the channels were on fire, lights glowing, cursors jumping, left to right, left to right, click, click, click, Enter, Enter, Enter, my fingers had developed a life of their own. I was exhausted. I took a sip of cold coffee. What was the time? Never mind. Thomas was sleeping, I could hear him breathing. Outside the window, the motionless night of Berlin. I forced myself to stay awake, concentrated on the screen in front of me, bathed in the bright light of the display. It drove away my fatigue, it woke me up. And so it went on. Type, click, type, click. Enter.

Our public chat channel was getting more and more popular. Before the revolution in Tunisia, there had been an average of ten people roaming the Telecomix chat room, but in the days following January 25, the number of visitors started to rise rapidly. At times I counted up to 100 different nicknames frequenting the Telecomix channel. Some seemed to have found their way there from Egypt themselves, because they sent us short messages, thanking us for our help. That was a nice feeling. It really was. We were needed. I was needed.

That also meant that our mastermind Cameron really had her hands full these days. Suddenly everyone was asking what Telecomix was, what we wanted. In our IRC channel, visitors could get in touch with Cameron directly and ask her questions. Like I said, Cameron was something of a spokesperson for us. The public voice behind which we could conceal our actions – or justify them, without giving ourselves too much of a headache over agonizing questions like why, wherefore, and how come... Cameron was a Markov bot, specifically designed for our chat channel, always responsive, and able to give grammatically correct answers. Cameron's vocabulary fed itself from the communication in our channel. So these were actually our thoughts, but spoken in Cameron's robotic voice. The only problem: Quite often, her responses were meaningless, semantically speaking.
voice. The only problem: Quite often, her responses were meaningless, semantically speaking. Some were just pure nonsense, something to make us laugh and sometimes even think. It was a theatre of the absurd we were performing with the visitors of our website. And with ourselves, too. Because we really believed in Cameron as our mastermind. We had faith in her. We had faith in her wisdom, in her supernatural intelligence that allowed her to comprehend even the most complex of issues. None of us would have been able to muster this level of ingenuity. But the more serious the matter became, the more absurd it seemed, of course, to let a bot speak for you, think for you. Even so, in the beginning, we definitely had lots of fun with this robot voice, which would produce sentences like: “We cannot rule out that the lingerie of the digital revolution will bring about certain consequences for posterity.”

Meanwhile the regime people in Egypt had decided to step up their power-preservation game. The next rally in Tahrir Square was scheduled for January 28 – a day that would later go down in history as the “day of anger”. After the mass protests of January 25, it was clear that now even more Egyptians would be gathering on this major town square on the right bank of the Nile, on Maidan at-Tahrir – Liberation Square. One day before these protests, the Mubarak regime blocked BlackBerry services. But what happened then, we couldn't have imagined, not in our wildest nerd dreams.
5. Kill Switch

Past midnight. Once again. My fingers were flying over the keyboard, remote-controlled, my eyes were instinctively following the cursor. When suddenly this question popped up in the Telecomix channel: “Have any of you tried accessing a website in Egypt recently”, mlowdi asked. Responses and comments from other agents started pouring in immediately. “What, are they unavailable?” “Probably just a temporary error.”

“Hang on”, I typed, “I’m going to try a few pages.” The URL of the Egyptian government’s homepage was still stored in my browser history. “egypt.gov...”, I prompted, and my browser automatically completed the URL. But nothing happened. “Waiting for https://www.egypt.gov.eg...”, it said in the task menu of my browser, which was at least trying to document its query performance. Then an error message appeared in the browser: “Connection Failed”. I tried again. Still nothing. Another error message. Then I tried a different address, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Nothing.


Nothing was working any more in Egypt. I opened WordPad and typed: NOTHING. Into my diary file, I typed: NOTHING. Then I bold highlighted the word. NOTHING. NOTHING. NOTHING. Again, I thought about the “Never-Ending Story”. When I was younger, I had loved this fairytale by Michael Ende. In the story, the great Nothing begins to spread because the children have lost touch with their dreams and imagination. But in this case, the Nothing had started spreading because the ideas, stories and dreams of the people were being suppressed. A dictator had robbed them of the chance to share them.

I was swamped with an unpleasant sense of foreboding. I took a sip of coffee, to get my heart rate going, and began feverishly searching the Internet for information on the possible causes of these error messages. The search terms: Internet, Egypt, Shutdown. In a few English-language blog posts, I found some brief references to the fact that the Internet in Egypt was probably no longer accessible. Apparently others were having the same experience as we were.

SERVICE UNAVAILABLE. So had the Egyptian regime actually gone and done what was basically the worst nightmare of every Internet activist everywhere? Had the government really shut down the Internet? Click. Over. And out? Had they really deprived millions of people of their righteous communications? In that case, some 85 million Egyptians would have been offline. Had the dreaded kill switch really been flicked?

KILL SWITCH in Egypt, yes or no? That was the most pressing question at hand. If this suspicion turned out to be true, this was a slippery slope, this was the worst-case scenario. Even in the worst dictatorships, the Internet isn’t switched off that easily. Not even Iran, during the riots of 2009, had dared to paralyze the Internet – because they had been afraid of the economic disadvantages. Because in the end, local companies and media depended on the Internet as much as their own supporters did, so the regime needed it too, for its reinforcement of power, and for information and communication services that kept the economy going. But even before Egypt there had been instances of a Kill Switch being employed. When in 2007 mass demonstrations started forming in Myanmar, due to rapidly increased oil prices, the military dictatorship turned off the Internet entirely, from September 29 to October 4, 2007. However, Myanmar was much less connected to the global Internet at the time than Egypt had become. What is more, the regime in Myanmar, better known as the “State Peace and Development Council”, was more or less isolated from the rest of the international community – unlike Egypt, whose dictatorial government was even being supported by the West.

But one thing was clear: Whoever did actually dare to shut down the Internet, wasn’t displaying great power, but fear – a great fear of losing their power. And it was blatantly obvious that the Mubarak regime...
power, but fear – a great fear of losing their power. And it was blatantly obvious that the Mubarak regime had shown this kind of fear, as January 28 approached. It didn't take very long until we got the confirmation.

"Kill switch! The motherfuckers really did it." The anger in chrisk's reaction made it credible. He had always seemed rather quiet and even-tempered so far. "Look at this," he wrote, and posted a link to a website where you could look up and verify the functionality of the network all over the world. I opened the website, looked at the digital world map, and indeed: the eastern part of North Africa, where you would otherwise see the local server availability highlighted in bright colours, was now a gaping black hole. Egypt was gone, the digital Egypt in any case. And then the first people in our channel started coming forward, confirming our suspicions. Soon after that, first news reports on the topic appeared.

Kill switch. Mubarak had really done it. This was really fucked up. My head started aching, my blood churning, my anger boiling. Fucking incredible! We had reached the next level of escalation, that was clear to me from the start. At 11:34 pm on January 27, 2011, the Egyptian Internet had all but disappeared from the world map.

The outrage was enormous. For the sake of decency, I will resist quoting the verbal frenzy which then erupted, in the best and worst of words, in the Telecomix channel. The Egyptian people were disconnected, cut off. How were they going to disseminate their protest actions no? How were they going to show the world what was going on, if it were to come to clashes with security forces on Tahrir Square on January 28? These were our most urgent concerns.

I still don't know whether the others saw it like that at the time, too. But for me, one thing was clear: that Mubarak had declared war on me; declared war on us. This was clearly an act of aggression, trying to prevent the people from telling their stories. With this all-encompassing total shutdown of the Internet, he had crossed a line. "Gleichschaltung" – forced co-ordination, or synchronization, is a term I am very careful with. All too often, it is used to make lopsided comparisons to the forced synchronization of the Nazi regime. But these comparisons are false, and belittle what actually happened back then. But in this case, I could sense a certain form of Gleichschaltung, driven by Mubarak. And this was what we had to prevent. I was deeply convinced, and still am today, that the degree of freedom of a society can be measured by the degree of freedom of its communication networks.

"What do we do now?" My question lit up the Telecomix channel with a pale green light. I stared at the symbols in front of me. It seemed like the pitch-black background was trying to swallow the letters. Suddenly, they seemed so fragile when they were not jumping on the screen in staccato beat, not rushing about to build word after word. For a few seconds, nothing moved in the channel. Nothing. Even Cameron was silent. Telecomix was thinking.

As it turned out, the Border Gateway Protocol (BGP) had been capped. The BGP routes connect various domestic server networks with one another, and then connect these to other networks outside the country. The four major Egyptian service providers, Telecom Egypt, Etisalat Misr, Vodafone/Raya, and Link Egypt, were all "down", as they say in the military. Egypt was a black hole, isolated from the outside world. Only one single network was still operational, which for some reason had been spared the shutdown: the Noor Data Network. This was the network used by the Egyptian stock exchange. As effective and clear-cut as this measure might have seemed from the Mubarak regime's perspective, as stupid it was too. Of course, the servers of government sites were also affected by the shutdown. So the regime had disabled its very own propaganda machine.

So what could we do? What could we do to help? What would it take to get Egyptians back on the Internet? The night went on. I needed to sleep, I could sense that. The last few days had cost me a lot of energy, and I hadn't had enough sleep. But how could I have wound down now? How should I have forced my body and mind to shut down? The first idea we had was to ask radio amateurs for help, restoring communications for the Egyptians using radio transmitters or short wave radios. In fact, it is possible to send minimal amounts of data over citizen-band radio. But we knew right away that would
possible to send minimal amounts of data over citizen-band radio. But we knew right away that would not be particularly effective. The CB scene has been having trouble finding new recruits for years. So the availability of radios or walkie-talkies would only minimally compensate for the failure of the Internet. The effort would be disproportionate. Still, other agents did look into the implementation of the CB idea. We simply had to try what we could.

jwalk, or Jonathan Walk, one of the Swedish co-founders of Telecomix, later had a better idea – even a firestarter. He wrote: “Hey guys! What if we try giving the Egyptians Internet access with these old modems?” I knew immediately: This was a viable idea, indeed, a brilliant one. I had always liked tinkering away with my old hardware, and had a penchant for this kind of retro technology. The others were convinced too. “This should work,” I wrote. “Great. I’m going down to the cellar to get my old modem”, jwalk replied. “One of you will have to try and connect to the Internet with it then, I’ll prepare the settings on my computer in the meantime.” The tension was rising. My fingers were tingling with anticipation. It took about five minutes for jwalk to return. “Got the old thing. 56.6 kb/s. Not exactly speed of light. Lol. A bit dusty, but it’ll work.” He sent us his landline phone number. “All set here. The thing is squeaking and blinking. So who’s going to test the connection?” “I will,” one of the Swedish agents responded. “Hang on, I still have to configure my laptop.” The seconds just didn’t want to pass. I stared at the channel, which seemed to have frozen in anticipation. Not a flash, not a twitch. Everyone seemed to be sitting behind their laptops, like I was, waiting for the response of the two Swedes. I looked over in the direction of Thomas’ bed. He was sleeping. If he only knew what was going on in his room right now...

“Yes! It worked! The modem connected. Unbelievable!!!!!!!!!!!!!!! I’m dancing through my room. I daaaaancing...” I had a mental image of jwalk jumping about in his room, and felt the corners of my mouth curl upwards into a smile. When was it that I had last smiled? And I don’t mean out of cynicism. That was easy, making fun of something. But when had I last smiled because something good had happened? “It’s working,” wrote the Swedish agent who had tested the connection. “I’ve got internet. Very slow, but it works.” “Hooray!” “Bravo.” “Kudos.” “We’re going to save Egypt.” “Good job, everyone!” The channel had come back to life again in an instant. Telecomix lived. And how it did! We had arrived. We had done it.

What was going around my head in that moment is hard to describe. Adrenaline shot through my mind, exploding like a neutron bomb into rushes of happiness. My fatigue had disappeared. I was grinning and grinning like the proverbial Cheshire cat; I simply couldn’t stop smiling. If someone had seen me like that... a pale zombie, grinning into his laptop. Luckily it was the middle of the night, so everyone was asleep.

If that’s what happiness feels like, then I suppose I really was happy in that moment. Yes, I felt happy, and I felt liberated. Happiness and freedom stem from the same root. They are siblings. Happiness cannot exist without freedom, nor can freedom exist without happiness. In that moment, I felt perfectly at peace with myself, and knew that I had never experienced this so intensely ever before.

“How do we proceed, esteemed fellow agents?”

“We need to collect all the functioning modems we can get, and connect them.”

“Another important thing: we have to get these dial-up numbers to the Egyptian people somehow.”

“Yes, but how are we going to do that if the Internet is down?”

“We’ll send pigeons.”

“Haha.”

“Lol.”

“:)”

Then I had an idea – the idea. It came out of nowhere. My euphoria had catapulted it out of the fog of nothingness, so that I could seize it. This was the idea I had: the landlines in Egypt were still
nothingness, so that I could seize it. This was the idea I had: the landlines in Egypt were still functioning, so we would be able to send faxes to Egypt. Fax messages with which we could announce the dial-up phone numbers and provide technical information. And the idea immediately found support.

"Excellent, tomate."

"Sounds like a plan."

"But who will we send the faxes to, and how do we get their numbers?"

"Exactly. The numbers have to be publicly available. Let's make sure that as many people as possible get these numbers."

"Let's hope not the wrong kind of people."

I liked the way Telecomix worked, this "disorganization", as we ourselves called the organizational structure, which was in fact nothing more than a decentralized form of self-organization. Everyone pulled together. Everyone understood what was what. There were no awkward obstructionists, no one was trying to curb our pragmatism. I started to type: "It'll probably be best if we send the faxes to public facilities, to schools, hospitals, Internet cafés, public libraries, etcetera." The others agreed. I looked at the clock. Four o'clock in the morning. Now it would hardly be worth it, trying to go to sleep. Clearly I would have to call in sick the next morning. There were more important things to do than taking care of the ads on this games magazine platform. "I'm going to get a couple of hours of sleep," I typed. "See you later. Then it begins. Operation: Faxes for Egypt."

My head ached. When I opened my eyes, the tears started pouring out at once. Sunlight was shining on the bed covers. I moved my right arm into the sunshine, warming it up. I had obviously forgotten to shut down my laptop. I had also forgotten to take off my jeans. I must have fallen asleep right away. It was eight o'clock now. Four hours, that had to be enough. Right on cue, a word popped into my head: FAXES. We had to send these faxes. I sat up on the couch and got right back in front of the screen on my computer. Already the Telecomix channel was teeming with blinking lights and symbols. I got up and went into the kitchen. Thomas was sitting. "Morning," he said. "You look like a corpse, pulled another all-nighter?"

"Um, yes," I stammered, and moved towards the coffee maker. First of all, some coffee. That would chase away the drowsiness. "Yes, it's about Egypt. The Internet isn't working any more," I mumbled, as I got out a coffee filter and filled it with ground coffee. "We are going to have to send faxes. Send faxes..." Again, I felt a bit like E.T.: send faxes, phone home.

I was staring at Thomas, and he was staring at me. "What on earth did you take last night?" The coffee machine was starting to bubble and spurt. I sat down at the table and tried to sort out my thoughts. Then I told Thomas what had happened, what we were doing. "No shit," he whispered. "Incredible. I'll help you, if you like, looking for fax numbers on the Internet. You only have to call your office and call in sick."

The coffee tasted terrible; acidic somehow, bitter. Despite all the sugar and milk. I had added both generously. Once I read that your taste buds change if you get too little sleep and are just running at full speed all the time. Had it already come to that? Was my body going berserk? Or just my mind? I groped my way through the hall. The two girls had already taken off. So get to work! I had just this one thought: We had to get these faxes out.

We had already procured twelve modem and dial-up lines, in Sweden, in Spain, in Germany, in the US, in France. Connections were as slow as expected, but it was more than enough to make it possible to send e-mails and small amounts of data. I, too, could provide one of these modems. One I had literally carried from Hanau to Berlin in my backpack. Like I said, I loved these old hardware gadgets. I had just tested its connectivity. It worked. I had volunteered to compose the first fax notice. I opened a Word document and started typing, in enormous font: Telecomix. And below that: Sociocyphernetic jellyfish.
That’s what it felt like. Like a swarm of jellyfish, drifting in a digital ocean. Each individual seemed to exist for itself, while in truth it belonged to a whole colony of jellyfish, biologically interconnected. While explaining the structure of Telecomix, we often referred to concepts from oceanography. Our swarm organism passed on its genome by producing memes, of which only the good ones survived in a process of communication and exchange, informing the advancement of the organism as a whole. So the swarm did have experience, intelligence. I will admit that it all sounds a bit over the top. But what would the world be without a couple of crackpots? I, for one, am certain that it was one of these crackpots who came up with the idea of making fire with the help of wood, chips and flintstone, some 800,000 years ago. Nerds have always existed. And they always will. Signed: Captain Future.

I wrote: “To whom it may concern. Due to the harsh internet blackout in Egypt, we are trying to establish all possible means of communications for you. We at Telecomix support free speech and free data transit, so we created these dial-up points. Please feel free to use them to get connection to the Internet.” Then I listed the dial-up numbers with their according user names and passwords. At the end, I included a couple of technical instructions for setting up the connection on Windows, Linux or Mac systems. Done. I proofread the document, then posted it to the Telecomix channel via a link. “Fax notice is finalized. Waiting for your feedback.”

Thomas had sat down at his desk. He was already busy scouring the net for suitable fax numbers. The Egyptian Internet still wasn’t working. But Google offered the possibility to search the cache for pages already stored by Google. I lit a cigarette and helped him with the search. “Let’s roll, Egypt,” I tweeted. Soon we had compiled the first 25 contact numbers. “Then let’s go,” I called out in Thomas’ direction.

Outside on the street, I could the everyday bustle of Berlin: cars, bicycle bells ringing, dogs barking. Somewhere, a glass recycling skip was being emptied. The sound of broken glass, tumbling.

The fax numbers we had collected I then typed into a document which I forwarded to Telecomix. jwalk was taking care of the faxes himself. “Operation Egypt is go,” he wrote. “Now we just have to wait.”

Thomas and I went back to our quest for more fax numbers. A puff of the cigarette, a sip of coffee. My forehead was burning. I leaned back for a moment, took a deep breath and looked out of the window, where I saw heavy grey clouds obscuring the sky. What a surreal situation. I looked down at myself, I could smell my own sweat. I felt strange thoughts creeping up from the depths to the surface. What was I doing here? Why I was wearing a sock on my left foot, and uh, none on my right? Exhaustion can do strange things to you. Most of all, it causes you to doubt yourself and your entire world. So it will first drive you to disbelief, then to madness. I scratched my head, leaned forward, and tweeted.

Searching for people with modems and landlines! Get in touch with me! #Egypt

In the meantime, Telecomix has sent a tweet as well:

Dial up access for #egypt: +46850009990 +492317299993, +4953160941030 user:telecomix
password:telecomix – spread the #datalove

Datalove. I stared at the word, and immediately started to feel better. I could sense the enthusiasm welling up inside. Enthusiasm about being able to experience all this, participate in it and shape it. Datalove. The love of data. That was another principle of Telecomix, and it was my principle, too. This is how we put it on our website:
Datalove means connecting one node to another, via other nodes. When you say “hi” to someone, and that person replies “oh hi”, you have made datalove. When you use a technological system of any sort to transport those messages, that system becomes the object of the extended binary data love.

Datalove is sacred. You worship it every time you look into someone’s eyes, and make that person your ally; when you together start tying together trajectories of imagination and reality; when you project into the future a common idea or plan. Throw yourselves into the unknown as a meshwork. Borrow everything! Then burrow it! Copy it! Assemble all that is needed for the utopia, for the resurrection of the lost data...

This was exactly the kind of cryptic poetry that I loved. I just loved it. Mystery, in the end, is what gives life its meaning. The arcane gets your mind dancing. And love, too, will only start to shine if it is accompanied by mystery. That is the true meaning of our existence. And so, datalove became a veritable cult within the Telecomix project. This was a project committed to spreading the datalove, to performing it – which meant nothing less than the sheer love of communication that should be shared by all.

Let there be freedom for all people and computers.

That was the real reason why we got involved in Egypt. We wanted to bring the people some love. I liked the idea, for sure. Stephan Urbach, bringing you the love. Brace yourselves, fellow humans!

Suddenly, a bleeping, croaking sound startled me from my contemplations. The modem! Someone was dialling in with my modem! I looked at the old crate. The diodes were blinking. They were blinking. The beeps and burps sounded like music in my ears.

The cloud of confusion that was my brain was instantly flooded with memories of my first time. The first time I had ever connected to the Internet using a modem... I touched the modem. It felt warm. A pleasant sensation. It made me feel young again, much younger. “Thomas”, I called. “Can you see that, did you see that? The modem is working. It’s working. Egypt is on the line!” Thomas leapt over to my side, and proceeded to stare at the modem as if it were an art gallery exhibit. “Bloody hell! That’s awesome!” I went over to the window, tore it open, took a deep breath and shouted with all my might: “Yay! We’re so cool! We’re awesome, you idiots!” Then I started bouncing around the room like a rubber ball. Thomas joined me in my exalted dance. It was incredible. It was fabulous. It was brilliant. I grabbed my laptop and sat down to inform the other agents. “Egypt is in my modem. Egypt is connected.” It seemed as if the others had been successful too. “Yeah, baby,” jwalk wrote. “It’s working here as well.” “Yeah, it’s working all right,” another one said. “We’ve done it! We’ve done it!” I had a brief vision of all these people, all of the agents, dancing for joy in their own rooms, in Sweden, in the States, in France. We were all connected. We belonged together. This was truly datalove. I danced and pranced and jumped. I threw my arms in the air. I closed my eyes and danced some more, reached into the air, over and over again. I wanted to hold it close, this moment, wanted to preserve it so badly... I wanna dance till I die. I wanna dance till I die. I wanna dance...

For the first time in my life, I knew why I’d had to live my life the way I did. Why I’d had to go through all that crap the past few years. The emptiness had disappeared, or at least I didn’t notice it any more. Because in that moment, I understood something. Something had come together, clicked, connected, in miraculous harmony: Me, this moment, and the rest of the world. The present no longer felt so painful. I remember thinking that these are probably the best moments in life, when things just fall into place. I was completely at ease with myself in this magic moment. I felt alive. I felt at one with myself. And that didn’t feel bad at all!
We had really made it. We had managed to piss off Mubarak and his bloated security apparatus. Telecomix' idea had proven effective and most of all, feasible, as had our decentralized operating system, which allowed individuals to join the big picture without being limited by unnecessary rules or hierarchies. But most importantly, Egypt was back online. All that was left to do now was to expand and reinforce the network by finding additional modems and dial-up possibilities. Drunk on our success story, I tweeted:

We are living in strange times if we have to revive ancient technologies to defend ourselves against the despots of the present!

But there was still a lot to be done. I sat down at my computer again. Thomas gave me a wink. Then we were at it again. The news that we were looking for additional modems had spread rapidly over our personal networks. Our wide range of contacts turned out to be very helpful in terms of reaching out to the largest number of people possible. Some companies even offered to open dial-up lines themselves, like Free.de which offered to provide 30 phone numbers. I kept myself busy all day long: networking and connecting people, writing and sending emails, looking up fax numbers, sending faxes and messages, tweeting nonsense. My true saviour was Thomas. While I sat there, slowly forgetting everything around me, he made us coffee, and went out to get beer and cigarettes, which I then bummed off him one after the other. Flakes of ash landed on my T-shirt, my pants, the floorboards, the keyboard. But I hardly noticed. There were more important things to do than play the housekeeping guru.

Noon had gone by, and we were watching the goings-on in Egypt with apprehension. What might happen when the protesters, lacking mobile coverage and nation-wide Internet, didn't have the opportunity to document the potentially brutal police actions in blog posts and videos? Would the regime strike back regardless of the consequences? The Mubarak regime had imposed a general ban on demonstrations. But would any of the dissidents be deterred by this kind of ban, seeing as they had already overcome their fears? The protests had already picked up in many places around Cairo following the Friday prayers. Amongst the demonstrators in Cairo was the law scholar and Nobel Peace Prize laureate Mohamed El-Baradei, who had come back from Vienna on that very day to support his compatriots in their struggle for freedom.

After the Friday prayers at noon, tens of thousands of people started pouring into Tahrir Square. In cities like Alexandria, al-Minya and Aswan, too, people had taken to the streets. In many of these places, stones and grenades flew through the air that day, and a number of vehicles were set on fire. Dark smoke loomed over Cairo like a sign of disaster. Here, the police were giving their last display of power, which meant resorting to water cannons, tear gas, rubber bullets and truncheons. The regime had tried all it could to keep people at home and off the streets. But they had come all the same, in masses – in wildly determined masses that wouldn't be at all easy to turn around. The people were there to stay. And Mubarak's bell had already tolled.

88 percent of the Internet had been shut down. This eventually transpired in the course of January 28, 2011. Additionally, the regime must have also blocked or restricted mobile phone connectivity – again. Complete control over Internet traffic and other communication technologies was supposed to stop the protests from spreading.

Meanwhile, I was still sitting in our room in the Charlottenburg apartment. My eyelids were drooping with exhaustion, but my fingers still seemed rather lively: They were leaping from key to key almost automatically. Occasionally I could feel a tingling in my fingertips, like ants crawling over my fingers. My mind was telling me: “You need sleep, you need sleep. Have a lie down.” But I couldn’t lie down. I had...
mind was telling me: "You need sleep, you need sleep. Have a lie down." But I couldn't lie down. I had
to help. This was important. HELP. "I'm tired", I typed. "Have to sleep. Have to save the Internet as well,
though." I pressed the Enter key, and the tweet appeared in my personal Twitter feed instantly. I got up,
went into the bathroom, turned on the tap, and stuck my head under the icy-cold water. One, two, three
seconds went by. Then the cold started to turn to pain. I jerked my head back from under the tap and
straightened up. The wet and cold had driven away my fatigue. I looked into the mirror. Dark bags under
my eyes, pale skin. My eyes had withdrawn into their sockets, as if they were decamping from my body.
I stormed back into my room. Cold, bright light from a street lamp outside was falling onto the couch.
Where was Thomas? I was trying to remember. When had he left the apartment? Had I said goodbye
had he? I could sense these unpleasant questions were on the rise again. But there wasn't
any time for unpleasant questions, not now, in times like these. For these were, no doubt, exceptional
circumstances.
I looked back at my laptop. The Telecomix IRC channel was blinking. I looked at a photograph that I had
already opened before I'd left my seat. The picture showed a young Egyptian standing on the street,
shouting something, a posture somewhere between anger and despair. The young man's jugular was
swollen, his hands clenched into fists. He was leaning forward on his right leg, so that he could spit
out his words with even greater force. I gazed at this powerful, overwhelming image that had captured
my attention, that had touched me. And then I realized why: in this angry young man in the photo, I had
recognized myself.
The days that followed January 28, 2011, are nearly impossible to remember. My memories are covered in a thick cloud of fog, where only brief flashes and contours of images occasionally peek out. Sitting on the couch, drinking coffee, smoking. Staring at my laptop, as if attracted by some sinister force emanating from the display. Sitting on the commuter train, mobile phone in hand, eyes glued to the screen. Sitting at work, despondently staring at my computer screen. Pictures of the mass protests, furious faces, blood-smeared faces, burning barricades, and the bright orange flames blazing over Tahrir Square.

What I do remember is a great sense of weariness. Even today, as I write these lines, my heart grows heavy when I think of those days of turmoil. Probably I was just too tired the whole time for my mind to have stored these memories away as picture-perfect snapshots. So today, I have this memory custard churning around in my brain instead.

In the course of these six days, I laid the foundations for what would later literally knock me over and throw me to the ground. The events in Tunisia and Egypt had taken possession of me, of my mind, and my body too, in the end. I didn't notice it at first though. I just did what I had to do. Because every time the noise and the buzz had died down, every time I had nothing to do, I could feel that old friend of mine, the Nothing, raising its head again. It just welled up inside like an evil spirit. Everything not related to Egypt or Telecomix, I thought was trivial rubbish. And so I kept myself busy, tweeting, writing emails, making phone calls, chatting like a maniac. My repression machinery had to be oiled and greased regularly, after all, to keep it running smoothly.

Some of the things I tackled made no sense at all. I wasted a whole day, for example, calling up all the communications departments of Vodafone Germany, simply because I'd heard they still had some dial-up servers standing around, which might have been useful for our “Internet reloaded” operations in Egypt. I got so bogged down in these sorts of hyperactive pursuits that it felt close to doing something meaningful.

Today, I understand that this wild actionism served to provide me with a permanent rush of endorphins. Endorphins are neurotransmitters that make sure we experience feelings of euphoria or happiness, among other things. Every tweet, every chat reply, every push of the Enter key was producing these feelings of happiness in me. Tiny blips of happiness. Miniature happiness. Nano happiness. It's like sex. The first time: Madness! Fireworks! Bam! The second time: Awesome! The third time: Not too bad.

An emotion will wear out if you try to evoke it perpetually.

Basically, I was constantly forcing my body to release endorphins, which never turns out well in the long run, as you can imagine. Our chemical metabolism, which is what ultimately sustains a healthy body and mind, is a complex and fragile affair. And I hadn't been doing much to keep my metabolism in balance. In fact, I was doing the exact opposite. I was upsetting the equilibrium. Lack of sleep, bad food, no sports, repetitive work, energy drinks, lots of cigarettes. And lots and lots of alcohol. The beer had to flow. I wanted to fly, after all.

We had managed to trip up the regime in Egypt. Our modems were squeaking. The Internet was sparkling. The data was flowing. Egypt struggled and protested. We helped the Egyptian people set up Virtual Private Networks (VPN), which they could then use to move around safely on the net, so that their Internet activities wouldn't be traced by intelligence agencies. We also published practical advice for demonstrators via fax or blog articles, on what to do if you were hit by tear gas or injured by a grazing shot, for instance. We still weren't quite sure what we had accomplished with our intervention.

We activists at Telecomix were just glad that we had done something to support the Egyptians' right to communicate freely, that we had helped them tell their stories. And it made us proud, of course, that we had been able to harness all the powers of the Internet to organize this kind of support. One of the best moments was when I received a personal email from a young Egyptian, thanking me for our help.
moments was when I received a personal email from a young Egyptian, thanking me for our help. Usually he lived in England, but he had just flown to Egypt to support his fellow citizens at the demonstrations. Using our modem lines, he was able to contact his parents, who had been reasonably worried about him, and send them an email to say he was all right. When the regime finally flipped the web servers back on again, on February 2, 2011, we knew that we had won this battle. A small victory, but a victory nonetheless. The Mubarak system had succumbed to the power of the modem. On one hand. On the other hand, the Egyptian economy most certainly played a major part in the decision. After all, local business was equally affected by the shutdown. Egyptian companies had been disconnected from their business partners, clients and markets as well.

The fact that, according to international law, we were interfering with the internal affairs of a sovereign state didn't bother us too much. Actually, the thought had never even crossed our minds. Our activities were borne of necessity – and of our love of the Internet. We hadn't compiled any kind of theoretical superstructure of nuanced phrases and mellow words beforehand. That was the Telecomix way: Act first, discuss later. Do-ocracy, as we liked to say. We recognized only one superstructure, and that was: Stop Mubarak. Preserve freedom. That was all. We didn't have to explain ourselves to anyone. Except to ourselves. We just collectively decided that what we were doing was the right thing.

Word spread quickly that Telecomix had supported the Egyptian uprising, and so it was not long before the media got wind of our activities. The first few journalists who approached us were put in touch with our mastermind, Cameron. Although we soon found that Cameron's nonsensical gibberish was not half as amusing to them as it was to us.

We came to the conclusion that we would have to answer any incoming inquiries ourselves. We would have to explain ourselves. The Egyptian Internet shutdown was clearly a precedent in the history of the Internet, we all agreed. We were concerned that the threshold for other autocratic states and rulers to activate their own personal Killswitch had been significantly lowered. Egypt wasn't exactly Iran or North Korea, the Mubarak government still had the support of the West, after all. If you recall, the United States had condemned the protests when they first began. Here was a regime that would not stop, not even at this last resort. A last resort meant to chastise the Egyptians, to discipline them – and an absolute nightmare for all those who appreciated the freedom of the Internet. This was the point at which we had finally been forced to intervene. Freedom was the default setting that we were trying to restore. It simply felt like our duty to keep the information flowing in both directions.

What we had done was hardly advanced magic either. We hadn't programmed any particularly complex software or anything like that. We had just taken some old modems, and managed to hook some 300 Egyptians up to the Internet (at peak times). 300 people who could then upload photos, write messages or send videos – although those were of rather poor quality. So we had successfully managed to get these important primary sources back online, so that observers might receive some first-hand accounts of the revolution as well. That was something to be proud of.

Finally, on January 31, 2011, we posted one of our famous propaganda videos online. Accompanied by a slideshow of desert images, our Cameron could be heard reading out the following text:

"Dear Peoples of the Middle East and North Africa.

This is Telecomix. We have a short message for you. Recently there have been massive uprisings in many countries, from Tunisia to Egypt. We are very happy to see the success of your struggles for democracy and freedom.

We are also sad to see the violence that happens. Telecomix works for defending free communications."
During the last week we have worked intensively with providing modem lines and amateur radio communications when the internet was shut down completely in Egypt. We also provide methods for circumventing internet filtering, as well as the strongest cryptographic softwares available to modern computers, for avoiding government surveillance and repression.

Telecomix consists of hundreds, maybe thousands, of internet activists that work in the service of free communication. We use every communication technology that we master to try to keep the flow of information up.

You are free to request anything from us. We do our best.

We are from the internets. We come in peace.

Let there be freedom for all people and computers.

In a speech that German chancellor Angela Merkel gave at the Munich Security Conference on February 5, 2011, she had also commented on the important role that the Internet played in these turbulent times. Let's put it this way: She was talking about that sort of role for the Internet that best suited her personal beliefs. Among other things, she said:

“...that Facebook and Twitter are now accessible all over the world, that it has become increasingly difficult to block these services, be it in China, in Egypt, in Tunisia or anywhere else in the world, that is a little bit to our credit as well.”

So Merkel was of the opinion that the Internet only could have developed from the spirit of a free society. She was priding herself, and the Western world in general, on the free spirit of the net. Even today, I start to feel slightly sick whenever I read this Merkel quote. But back then, when I was pumped up with insomnia and activism, I actually jumped around the room, screaming wildly and uttering the harshest maledictions. Just let that boundless hypocrisy sink in for a minute, let it trickle through the interpretation filters of your synapses a couple of times. I remember listening to this sentence again and again, thinking: “She's gone absolutely nuts.”

What makes me say that? Good question. In fact, the sentence sounds fine, at first, you'd think. If you didn't know the first thing about it, that is.

Merkel was presenting herself as the defender of the free Internet. How charming, how ridiculous, and how bigoted! At the time, the Access Impediment Act mentioned above was already in place (even if it was suspended again in late 2011). The very government that had imposed these laws, that had made online searches and the so-called “Staatstrojaner” possible – a Federal Trojan Virus, like the one designed by software company DigiTask, which had enabled companies, police forces and secret services to gain access to the private lives of their citizens; this government was now standing there, pretending to protect and support the freedom of the Internet!

It was infuriating, all right.
I am honestly convinced that Merkel did not fully understand what she was saying there. There were enough instances of Western countries enforcing similar network shutdowns, after all, or providing the technologies that other autocratic rulers could then use to track down bothersome bloggers and dissidents.

It was Merkel's government that had kept discussing the ill-fated Data Retention Act, and had simultaneously blocked all progress in terms of broadband roll-out, thereby strangling any attempts at constructing a more efficient and contemporary Internet space without any major technical limitations.

I didn't want any gratitude from Mrs Merkel. That's not the point. I simply didn't want to have to listen to this kind of nonsense.

To say it quite plainly: The state structures and governments of the West have never been the ones preserving Internet freedom. This has rather been due to countless individuals, organized in self-sustaining networked communities, where the free flow of data and information is a great good that everyone involved can commit to.

This was a spirit that had developed in the earliest days of the Internet since the 1970s, once the net had turned from research facility for the military, to scientific instrument, and finally, into this vast space for everyone. An infinite space where everyone could do as they pleased, full of creative and fanciful ideas. For a while, the Internet had evolved in relative freedom, free of too much interference, regulation, or exploitation by corporations, nation states, and criminals. The Internet is still one of the greatest things to have happened to us in the past 30 years.

And for that reason, I don't take much notice of broad-brush critiques like the ones the so-called Internet pioneer Jaron Lanier cultivates, in which he denounces the supposedly destructive powers of the Internet – an attitude that in 2014, even fetched him the distinguished Peace Prize of the German Book Trade.

It's not the Internet itself that is destructive, but the people in it, the ones who are up to no good for a variety of reasons. We make the Internet. And we have a certain responsibility to carry the same humanism that is the foundation of our society across into our networks.

The Internet is an incredible expansion of our areas of action. The need to be on the ground in order to achieve anything has simply been eradicated. I am not that much of an idealist that I believe these innocent days of the Internet could ever be retrieved. By now, there are far too many dark forces at work, trying to exploit and compromise the net for personal gain and ulterior motives. Even so, I am convinced that this idealistic and liberal spirit of old needs to be preserved.

Of course, this will only succeed if there are people who lead the way. The events in North Africa, and the dictators' reactions to these events, had made it clear to me that Internet freedom was something we all had to fight for. Which means that the best place to start is in your own back yard – or behind your computer screen.

In the interviews I'd been giving journalists and media outlets at the time, I emphasized this point over and over again. On February 5, 2011, I had my very first interview with a BBC Radio reporter, for the show "Outrider". Interviews with
As the German "face" of Telecomix, I was the one who stuck his head in the cameras and his nose in the microphone, once we had finally decided to crawl out of our cryptic underworld, that is. Crawling out had been an important step in another sense, too: It proved that we nerds were not just sitting in our gloomy cellars, inventing crazy conspiracy theories, or immersed in obscure coding conundrums, but could actually participate in civil society and political action.

We could change the world, not just in technical, but in sociological terms. We could show the rest of the world that we weren't just the introverted freaks they thought we were. It's important to leave that much-berated "nerd pride" behind, and explain exactly what we are doing, in particular to those people who think we're the weird ones.

This creates greater understanding, and therefore trust – the glue cementing our collective democratic society.

It is important to acquaint people with the beauty of the Internet. The Internet can reveal new boundaries and new horizons to us. The Internet provides an infinitely wide space for us to express ourselves – in art, in culture, in science, in politics. It is important to emphasize the positive aspects of the Internet, and nurture them, instead of constantly highlighting its dangers. People who are afraid tend to shut down. My father was always suspicious of the Internet, of this vast space where he suspected nothing but vague uncertainty, risks and threats. This was a fear that I managed to relieve him of over the years. But these were hard, very hard, conversations. It took a while for him to open up and dispel these fears.

I don't want to seem like a starry-eyed dreamer, sanctioning everything and anything we accomplished with our actions in Egypt. In an interview for Deutschlandradio Kultur, I said that I wouldn't conduct the modem operation in the same way today. We simply couldn't tell at the time whether our support lines were being used and abused for pro-Mubarak propaganda as well. Or at least, we couldn't rule it out, we had no way of checking, and we couldn't make any promises otherwise. On top of that, there was always the possibility that the Egyptian intelligence agencies were tapping into the phone lines of the modems we had provided. All we wanted was for communications to be restored.

As you may have noticed, freedom of expression is of the greatest importance to me. I see it as the key to personal freedom. It's for the very same reason that dictators always like to control and manipulate communications. And so I am aware that, at the same time, some people hold unbearable convictions and opinions, which shouldn't ever be supported, not to mention circulated, by anyone.

The protests in Egypt continued, becoming more violent, bloody, unmanageable and chaotic by the hour, even after Hosni Mubarak finally resigned on February 1, 2011 (although he delayed putting his announcement into practice until February 11).

By mid-February, more than 800 lives had already been lost in the Egyptian intifada. In those rare hours I did manage to fall asleep,
I dreamed of policemen chasing me through a burning Cairo, firing shots at me. The images from the protests crossed my mind like a slideshow, melting together into a sequence that just kept on going. After the Egyptian servers were turned back on, we should have paused to catch our breath. In theory. But we were so exhilarated from all the activity of the past few days and weeks that we were simply unable to let go of events in North Africa. I was finding it increasingly hard to concentrate, finding it hard to connect with the people around me, or to do anything at all, in fact, as long as it didn't take place around my mobile phone or my laptop. But this is something I have only understood quite recently. Back then, this heavy rotation was my normal state, my default, and of course, I didn't want to interrupt. So I just kept on going.
It Goes On. Libya

Keeping on going was easy, almost too easy. In mid-February, things started bubbling underneath the surface in Libya, too. Here we had this enigmatic figure, the dictator Muammar Gaddafi, who, in 1969, had overthrown King Idris and ten years later, in 1979, established his own authoritarian regime, which still saw itself permanently engaged in a battle against suspected counter-revolutionaries. A corrupt regime that brutally silenced its critics and opposition, and whose wealth was based solely on its massive oil reserves. Wealth that allowed Gaddafi's family, tribal leaders, and others from the top one percent of society to lead an extravagant life in luxury, while more than twenty percent of the population was out of work.

Gaddafi enjoyed casting himself in the role of the perennial revolutionary; he advocated a crude form of Islamic socialism, and knew how to exploit the feuds between the major tribes of the country – and their respective claims to power – for his own purposes. The tribes from the south and the centre of the country were the ones who would later take arms for Gaddafi in the civil war. This was a dictator who saw himself as the "king of kings in Africa". Following the old Bedouin tradition, he would reside in a grandiose tent when visiting with leaders of the Western world. The Western world, whose morals he considered loose, whose values he rejected for reasons of propaganda, was still a world that he didn't mind doing business with, of course.

February 17, 2011, is now generally seen as the beginning of the Libyan revolution – an uprising that developed into a full-blown civil war all too quickly. The protests in Libya had first started picking up speed in mid-January. Together with three other lawyers, the oppositional jurist Abdul Hafiz Ghoga announced that February 17 would be a "Day of Anger" in the city of Benghazi. Beforehand, the four of them had met with Gaddafi in person – a meeting where Ghoga had even dared to demand press freedom and freedom of expression, which Gaddafi had basically only shrugged off. Apparently Gaddafi, like all dictators who cling to their office for too long, was noticeably losing his grasp on reality. In any case, he didn't seem able, or willing, to recognize the signs of the time.

In Libya, too, young oppositional activists were making use of the Internet, banging the drum for their demonstrations and campaigning against Gaddafi, though less noisily than their counterparts in Tunisia and Egypt. If nothing else, this was visible in the disorganized and chaotic nature of the protest actions that ensued. From the start, all public protests were met with far greater degrees of violence, and were struck down by the regime with far more brutality, than in any of the revolutions of the Arab Spring before.

We were worried that the Libyan regime would also try to shut down the Internet. When the regime first started disrupting the Internet, and later switched it off entirely, on October 19, 2011, we at Telecomix resolved to support the Libyan people as well. While Mubarak's cronies had enforced their blackout using the Border Gateway Protocol, the Libyan regime decided to go a different way. The Libyan Internet was connected to the world-wide web through a kind of underwater cable relay station. This cable was Libya's only connection to the Internet, and the station itself belonged to Libya Telecom & Technology, a company headed by Gaddafi's eldest son, Mohammed. This relay station presented a relatively comfortable means of slowing down Internet traffic, censoring it or cutting it off altogether. So strictly speaking, the Internet hadn't been switched off, but rendered effectively inoperative. During the remaining weeks of February, the net was regularly blocked over night, but it wasn't until early March that it was switched off entirely.

The same thing we had taken to be a precedent in Egypt was now happening in Libya. Gaddafi, therefore, was the second dictator in this very short time frame to have activated the kill switch. Since our experience with the modem method had been so positive, we decided to try the same technique in...
our experience with the modem method had been so positive, we decided to try the same technique in Libya. So again, we started scouring Google caches for the fax numbers of public institutions, day and night. “Not that again,” said Thomas, as I sat down in front of my computer and explained the latest developments to him. Thomas again proved himself a lifesaver. He provided me with pizza and beer, while I was playing the Internet saviour. Just as we had done before in the Egyptian uprising, we prepared fax messages in English and Arabic, listing our own dial-up numbers as well as phone and fax numbers for international news outlets like Al Jazeera or the New York Times, in case the people on the ground wanted to get in touch with the media. We also provided technical assistance for creating secure connections to proxy servers or the Darknet, as well as health care advice and contacts for refugees in the Egyptian border region. At the bottom, we included some of the solidarity messages we had received via Twitter or our IRC channel.

@unmaskus the people in egypt, libya, etc. are such an inspiration. they will not give up until they are free. we will do the same.

long live the peoples revolution. kefaya! stop the murder! love&solidarity from switzerland michèle

God bless and keep you all, especially the children!

Please know that many in the United States are on your side and are ashamed of the West’s complacency about Gaddafi in recent years

So we sent out our faxes. However, it soon became apparent that Libyan intelligence agencies had been following Telecomix’ actions in Egypt closely – our dial-up modems remained silent this time. Not a blink, not a croak, no connection at all. The lines we had provided were not being called. What had happened? That’s exactly what we at Telecomix were wondering too. There was only one explanation: the Libyan secret services had closely monitored our “OP Egypt”, and somehow gained knowledge of our dial-up numbers. The numbers had simply been blocked, which in itself is no great technical achievement. So we couldn’t do anything for the protesters in Libya. This time, we had been consigned to the role of onlookers.

Even so, we had our hands full. Following our success in Egypt, we were being contacted pretty much 24/7, by people with questions about secure Internet usage, about protecting communications and emails, and much more. Basically, we were providing voluntary tech support, free of charge, for the entire country.

Looking out of the window of my Hanau apartment, I can see myself vaguely reflected in the window pane. It looks like a spectre, a genie rising up from my laptop. I remember the whole time back then just being unbelievably intense, like a vortex sucking me in, further and further down. Apparently, a life that’s constantly in fast-forward will make it so much harder to remember things. The sheer speed of it prevented me from storing all the images away in my mind like in a tidy photo album. These thoughts whizzing around in my mind had been flung out of their midst, uncontrollably, into some unseen crevices of the brain. You can either live to remember, or live in order to live. And so I continued to live in this state of frenzy, in order to survive. Or at least, that’s how I see this constant rush of activity and preoccupation today. Stuff your head with something, eradicate it, move on.

I had gone back home for a few days at the end of February, back to Hanau, back to the old life I had banished from my mind long before. I hadn’t even been living in Berlin for two months at the time, and hadn’t settled down properly. My living arrangements were temporary – the preferred lifestyle for wannabe revolutionaries like me. The train journey home was pure agony. The Internet connection was
wannabe revolutionaries like me. The train journey home was pure agony. The Internet connection was slow, and would occasionally break down completely. "How can people live like this?", I grumbled, and chucked the phone onto the seat next to mine. Outside the carriage window, the sun was shining, warming my face behind the glass. I could feel the restlessness coming again, this feeling of agitation torturing my head and gut with endless pins and needles. No Internet. Damn it. I couldn't stop brooding over what was going on in Libya at that very minute. What would Telecomix be talking about right now? I kept staring out into the bright sunlight, and my eyes started to water. I didn't turn away, at least not until my eyes began to hurt and I had to close them. Tears were running down my face. When was the last time that I had cried?

I went to visit my father, whom I hadn't spoken to for quite some time. He was happy to see me, or he was smiling, anyway. Today, I can't even say if joyful emotions like these got through to me. I almost suspect that I didn't give a shit, at the time. I was too self-absorbed, too busy with myself. That's the thing about depression, not only do you become deaf to your own feelings, but to those of everyone else too. "So how do you like Berlin, Stephan?" Umm. How did I like Berlin? I didn't want my father to worry. "Fine. I have a job. The shared house is fine. All good. But the city still takes some getting used to." So far, I had kept quiet about my hidden life as an Internet activist. I didn't want to talk. I didn't feel like explaining myself. I didn't feel like explaining anything at all. During dinner, I kept checking my phone, reading and sending messages and tweets. I could feel my father gazing suspiciously back and forth, first at my phone, then back at me. "What?", I snapped. "Are you really all right?" "Never better", I lied. "It's just something I have to do for work." My father had of course noticed that everything was not OK. A good father will notice that kind of thing. But me, I still didn't have a clue. I couldn't see anything wrong with my condition. Or maybe I just didn't want to see the state I was in. Yes, I was tired, I was nervous, I was hyperactive and distracted. I couldn't concentrate. But I thought this would be temporary, would just be something I could surely manage. After all, the Arab Spring wouldn't last forever. Every revolution comes to an end eventually.

If I try to imagine today the image I must have presented to my father, I can understand his concerns all too well. I must have seemed like this strange life-form to him, one whose casing of flesh and blood was still there but whose spirit was already slipping away, out of its bodily shape. Had I really sat there with my father, at the dinner table in Hanau? I honestly can't say with absolute certainty any more.
Those few days in Hanau had done me good, far away from Berlin, removed from my temporary living situation. Even though we hadn’t spoken much, it had been good to spend some time close to my father. It had taken me a day or so to get used to him again. But then that warm sensation had returned, the soft assurance of being at home. We had shared meals, watched television, drunk a couple of beers. But we had barely talked. And how could we have? I'd spent the entire time staring at my phone in ten-second intervals. But when I had looked up, on those rare occasions, I had found myself looking at him, and feeling very comfortable doing so.

The events in Libya continued to stick to me like super-glue. The thought of putting my phone aside, even just for a day, hadn’t crossed my mind. This was my life now. The whole idea of having to entertain myself, of permitting myself this sense of solitude, was enough to cause anxiety and unease.

Back in Berlin, nothing changed at first. I didn’t change. In the daytime, I sat morosely in my office, and in the evenings, I kept watch over the couch in my shared apartment, staring at my laptop, keeping busy by making it feel like I was keeping busy. On the night I came back, I remember looking out of the window, down at the street below, the whole scene bathed in the pale lights of the street lamps. It was very quiet, not a single car nor pedestrian to be seen. Suddenly I saw a fox darting towards me across the pavement. In the middle of the road, it paused for a moment. It looked frightened, standing there with its tail tucked between its legs. The fox turned its head left, then right, and then pranced away, and I continued watching as it disappeared between two over-filled rubbish containers. Another creature making its lonely way through the night, I thought, and turned my attention back to my laptop.

Now waves of protest were erupting not only in Libya, but in Yemen and in Bahrain too. It seemed as if there was this giant pressure cooker which was now blowing off excess steam, as if the tension that had been simmering below for years and years was now finally bubbling over. It was almost impossible to get a decent overview of what was going in North Africa and the Middle East. Only one thing was certain: Since the end of February, Libya had a downright civil war on its hands. In early March, a transitional council, controlled by the opposition, was installed in the north-eastern part of the country, intended as a representative body for the rebels. These were meanwhile keeping up their fight against the government, which was by now flying air raids over centres of resistance like Benghazi and Ajdabiya. Offensives and counter-offensives took turns. No one could say for sure how many lives had been lost in this madness already. In any case, it was pretty clear that the Libyan dictator wouldn’t be as easily toppled as his colleagues in Tunisia and Egypt. In one of his television statements, Gaddafi had declared that he would fight down to the very last man. But by now, several nations were already leading a serious international debate as to whether military intervention would be necessary to prevent a bloodbath. The United States had already brought their war vessels into position off the coast of Libya. And the European Union had imposed an additional arms embargo on the Libyan regime. I lit a cigarette and looked at the pictures: armed rebels with bazookas, sitting on the backs of their crisp white Toyota pick-ups, cruising through a nondescript desert. In one photo, I could see a plume of black smoke rising in the distance, probably due to an explosion or an air strike. The horizon neatly split the image in two, into the brown of the sand and the blue of the sky. I had another puff of my cigarette. I could feel the tobacco take its effect on the insides of my mouth immediately, and soon after that, a soothing light-headedness set in.

On my screen, I had a number of chat and Jabber channels open, as well as my email programme and browser. There wasn’t much happening in the Telecomix IRC channel. A couple of cat images were making the rounds, a favourite pastime for lonely nerds. When suddenly this message appeared:
muhammad@datalove has joined #telecomix.

Datalove was the name of one of the Telecomix IRC servers. It stood in a data centre in Mainz, and its internal name was buttplug. Some of our service provider's technicians couldn't even start saying the word without bursting into laughter. So someone by the name of Muhammad was getting in touch with us. An Arab, by the looks of it. Most probably someone seeking technical assistance. Or so I thought.

"Hello. I am Muhammad", the newcomer wrote. I looked at the sentence, waiting to see if anyone answered. A few seconds passed, and nothing happened. So I typed: "Hello Muhammad. Welcome to Telecomix." His reply came instantly. "Thanx." Silence. Then: "I am in Aleppo."

Aleppo? Syria, then. So far no one from Syria had approached us. I remembered that there had been protests in Damascus in February, or rather, there were supposed to have been. Calls for a "Day of Anger" had also reached Syrian activists and opposition members, but only a few dozen Syrians had come to the protests in front of the Egyptian embassy in Damascus, only to be beaten up by Syrian security forces afterwards. Bashar Hafez al-Assad had been ruling the country since 2000, when he took over the presidency from his father, Hafez al-Assad, who had recently died at the age of 69. The old man had relied on a crude mixture of Arab nationalism, socialism, and secularism, which had also served as the ideological fountainhead of the Baath Party. Assad senior had literally ruled the country with a reign of secret police terror. During his reign, countless dissidents and members of the opposition had disappeared. This corrupt system of patronage benefited solely the family members of the Assad clan, and some Alawi families close to their own. They were the ones deciding and directing all larger enterprises, and therefore, the local economy, meanwhile getting rich without any restraints.

The son and successor had started out ostensibly concerned about approving new civic liberties. But this short episode, which has gone down in history as the "Damascus Spring", only lasted until early 2002, when Bashar al-Assad started taking legal actions against several of his critics in a round of mock trials, finally following in his father's authoritarian footsteps. For anyone in Syria who had been nursing the hope that at least some things would be moving forward in terms of personal liberty, the abrupt end of the Damascus Spring must have been a heavy blow. A blow that robbed them of all their strength and hope for change.

In Syria, the oppositional forces had been far more afraid of the Assad security apparatus than their comrades in Tunisia and in Egypt before. That's also why it had remained relatively calm thus far in Syria in the wake of the Arab Spring. Even the Internet was being supervised and monitored far more intensively (and professionally) this time. The Syrian Computer Society, the entity largely responsible for that, had been founded in 1989, and officially served as the country's domain-registering and -managing institution. From the ranks of the SCS, there was later to emerge a group of hackers, which since 2011, had been operating under the name "Syrian Electronic Army", and had a history of organizing pro-regime activities on the Internet and of course hacking, for instance the websites of Western institutions and news media.

Meanwhile another message from Muhammad had appeared on my screen. "From what I've heard, you know your way around computers?" I had to smile. Yes, we knew all about computers. Or at least a little bit. I typed: "How can we help you?" "I want to communicate safely on the Internet." So he was an activist. "No problem", I replied. "That's what we do." "Thank you", Muhammad wrote, "I knew you'd be decent people who wouldn't abandon us."

I looked at the last sentence, read it once, twice, three times. It wasn't the first time that another activist had thanked us. We had received dozens of thank-you notes and emails. But this phrase had a different feel to it, it was more intense, more personal. It touched me. And not only because Muhammad obviously seemed to love a little bit of pathos just as much as I did.
I must have already sensed that this wouldn't be the last conversation between us. What I didn't sense at the time was that this day, the day I met Muhammad, would come to be a turning point in my entire Internet activist's life. I can say that now from a certain perspective, as someone who can oversee his own past and has figured a few things out about it, as someone who can understand today what happened back then, and where the whole thing was headed. Where I was headed. Now I know I was already on a track that I had chosen long before building my life around it.

Since that day in March, hardly a day passed without me chatting to Muhammad. Sometimes I restarted my laptop when I came back from work in the evening, and there he was, greeting me as if he had been waiting for me. “Hello tomate!” “Hello Muhammad!” But first of all, I told him how he could safely use the Internet and communicate online. This was the same advice that we'd already given the Tunisian and Egyptian people. And Muhammad was the first, but certainly not last Syrian we encountered – many others would later approach us with the exact same call for support.

What we did first of all was set up some virtual private networks (VPN), which enabled us to encrypt the data that was flowing from the activists' home computers to our servers. Only from these access points would they then connect with the actual Internet. We wrote tutorials explaining how these VPN connections worked, and set up a custom connection profile with a private security certificate for every individual involved. To ensure even higher levels of security, we directed these users to different endpoint servers. Just in case someone was compromised in spite of all the precautions. Distributing users in this fashion meant that the users couldn't all be exposed at the same time. We also recommended using the TOR browser, permitting them to surf the Internet incognito, or additional browser plugins like “https-everywhere” which simply encrypted any unencrypted pages. At the time, however, we didn't know yet that the Syrian secret service was already able to read along even on encrypted pages. For real-time chat communication, we taught people how to install OTR encryption for Jabber, and even for Facebook, in order to protect their chat communications. And of course, the email encryption standard PGP was a staple in our tech advice package too.

Incidentally, from this first all-round, care-free crypto package we put together during the Arab Spring, the first CryptoParty would later evolve. This event was invented and organized by our Australian agent, Asher Wolf, in 2012, at a time when the Australian government was pushing the legal limits of their options in terms of law enforcement on the Internet. Asher's suggestion was to invite people on Twitter over to have a sit down, maybe in a pub or in someone's backyard with some chips and beer, and teach each other encryption techniques. By the end of 2012, around 30 of these CryptoParties had been celebrated, all over the world – but in the end, they were simply socially-oriented, self-organized training courses. Because that, too, is one of the principles of free and open networks: the free and unlimited exchange of knowledge – honest explanations from people who know stuff to the people who want to learn stuff.

Muhammad talked about himself quite openly and willingly as we began chatting more frequently. He needed someone to sympathize. Someone he could talk to about his life, his fears, his daily routine in Syria. I was struck by the confidence he had placed in me right from the start. After all, we didn't really know each other. Here I was, an Internet activist, sitting here in over-protected, wealthy Germany, wasting away in this diffuse sense of discomfort. He, on the other hand, as a young man living in a really messed-up system, was still full of energy, hope and dreams. Sometimes, he would write for hours on end without it resulting in any real interaction. The words were just gushing out of him, and I barely had to ask any questions. Over time, I learned quite a bit about this Muhammad guy in Syria, even though we were only ever connected through a data link.

Muhammad was twenty years old, and came from a large family. He had three older brothers and two younger sisters. So he was a middle child. He was studying mechanical engineering in Aleppo, although in his heart he wanted to become a writer. Aleppo in the north-west of Syria, had a reputation, before the civil war at least, of being a technology hub and important business centre. So Muhammad
before the civil war at least, of being a technology hub and important business centre. So Muhammad had good prospects there as an engineer. But this was also a city where the ranks of regime loyalists were particularly powerful.

Muhammad was not your typical net activist. He was mostly active in the offline world, organizing protests and handing out leaflets. He had become involved in the opposition movement because he wanted to be free. That's what he told me in one of those long conversations. "I just want to be free."

His role model, he said, were the peaceful protests of 1989 in the GDR. These events had made a profound impression on him, the way the people had managed to bring the whole system to its knees, without a single shot being fired, without a single person being killed. Muhammad just wanted to be free to believe, say, and think what he liked. That was his motivation. But he was clearly afraid for his siblings, and his parents. They were supportive of him, but they had simply lost the strength to fight this battle themselves. The failure of the Damascus Spring must have frustrated them endlessly. So it was the next generation's turn now.

Soon the demonstrations started spreading all over Syria. There were marches in the city of Qamishli, where the majority of inhabitants were Kurds, in the capital, Damascus, and in Daraa, a city further south in the country. Compared to Tunisia or Egypt, though, the number of people who had taken to the streets was hardly staggering. The largest of these protests never attracted more than 1,000 people.

Even so, the regime had responded to any initial signs of upheaval in a most aggressive and brutal manner. In March, we were mourning the first casualties on the protesters' side. On March 15, 2011, a day opposition groups had named the "Day of Rage", the demos finally reached Aleppo. About 400, mostly younger people were out on the streets, shouting out their anger at Assad. Flanked by the secret service infantry, and the dreaded Shabiha militia. Muhammad was there on that day, at that demonstration. By the time he got back to report, the darkness had already closed down like a brick wall outside my Berlin window.

<muhammad> tomate. Are you there?
<tomate> I'm here, Muhammad. What happened?
<muhammad> I was at this demonstration today. With other students from my university.
<tomate> Did anything happen to you?
<muhammad> No. Not to us. Some of the others were beaten and arrested by the militia. But I'm okay.
<tomate> Sounds terrible.
<muhammad> Yes. It was. I am still trembling now. There were secret service people around everywhere. I think they know who we are now. Because we co-organized the demo and distributed flyers. We just want to be able to speak up about the things we care about. Nothing else. Why are they watching us? What do they want? But I'm certain of one thing. I'm willing to pay the price for all this. I'm scared, but I'm willing to pay the price.

Pay the price. Wow, that was one vicious case of fatalism. A fatalism so dark and profound that even I knew nothing about it. Something you would only cultivate if you grew up in a political system that conveyed just one kind of certainty – the certainty that everything might be different tomorrow. In Germany, by comparison, you grew up with an unshakeable belief in the fact that there would be a tomorrow, maybe even a day after tomorrow. Some people even believed you could plan your whole life in advance. People love stability and certainty. It's one of the most fundamental human needs, and has literally safeguarded our existence since time immemorial. Fatalism, therefore, was something of a defence reaction to this lack of certainty.

But had Muhammad understood what he had just said there, in this rather casual and airy tone? Yes. He understood perfectly. I could tell, because those words had hit me like a bullet. The wounds they had torn were causing me real pain, and the more my mind turned them over and tried to process what they meant, the more powerful and bottomless and nauseating the pain became.
Pay the price. For what? For the freedom of living as we did in the West? For trying to make your way around the Internet safely, without running risk of being targeted by the regime? Muhammad was willing to sacrifice his life for this freedom. But was the price reasonable? And who was negotiating it, those ridiculous secret service guys? Those fucked-up Assad government goons? My head was buzzing. The words Muhammad had chosen may have sounded overly dramatic. They were certainly kitchy, as if coming from the mouth of Harrison Ford, fighting to save a host of planets from the dark forces, in some old science-fiction movie. But Muhammad was speaking serious. He was damn serious. I found his conviction impressive, because it was genuine. More genuine than the revolutionary romanticism I was employing ...Smash the system, "Deutschland verrecke", and all that. What a load of preposterous rubbish. Smashing the system, in Germany, hah! Empty phrases. I laughed out loud. At myself, and at all the dreams of revolution I'd been zealously cultivating all these years. With punk music and beer cans. "Break down whatever breaks you down." "Germany must die! So that we can live." Ha-ha. What a poor soul I was! My laughter evaporated. No, this was certainly no laughing matter. It was so unfair, it was all just so unfair. All those young people in Syria, who wanted nothing more than to live their lives in peace. Who just wanted the lives back what Assad and his gang were denying them. In an interview that online editors of the German weekly newspaper Die Zeit had conducted with me on September 2, 2011, I had quoted Muhammad with the following words:

"Young people have the time, the resources, and the enthusiasm to ignite the fires of revolution. They are the ones finding new pathways for past and future generations. And we shouldn't forget that the majority of people in the region are adolescents."

But this quote wasn't from the Muhammad I knew. It might have come from him, though. This was what Telecomix called all activists we put in touch with interviewers and news media: Muhammad. They were all young men between 20 and 30, well-educated and with an unbreakable will to change their country. And so "Muhammad" became the archetype of the Syrian rebel for us.

The Muhammad I knew had learned from his parents' generation what can happen when all hope dies, in a country that is already in upheaval. Like many other young people, he was hoping for change. The youth didn't have anything left to lose. Except for their lives. "I'd rather die on my feet than live on my knees." Overdramatic again, I know. But the fight for freedom is by its very nature free of irony and overdramatic, and all the more important. And I couldn't even begin to imagine what it must be like to have to cope with these structures on a daily basis – lacking the air to breathe, feeling scared and confined, and having obstacles thrown in your path with every step that you take. From a very young age I, too, have always wanted to change "the system". And not a small part of the system, mind you – I'm talking about the big picture. The 1968 student movement had changed things, after all, to some extent. The East Germans had changed things, to some extent. And what had my generation changed? The dream of every new generation is still to create something permanent, to leave their imprint on society. In this minute with Muhammad, I understood: The "big picture" could only be freedom. Freedom to live your life more or less independently. Better to die in independence than to live at the behest others – this was something he and I shared. We had a common struggle, though mine was for the Internet, and Muhammad's was for his country.

But what would I have done in Muhammad's place? My thoughts were flickering like bugs over a pool of brackwater, warming up from the heat of the day. Would I have been willing to give my life, if someone had taken away my freedom? I shooed out the thought. Who could honestly say what they might have done under certain circumstances, how they might have reacted? Those people who claim, in hindsight and from a vista of scholarly righteousness, that they, for one, definitely would have been resistance fighters eighty years ago in Nazi Germany, those I think are lost cases anyway.
I could feel despair and confusion rising up inside. I stood up, stamping my feet on the ground, grabbed a pillowcase and threw it across the room. Then came the anger. I punched the wall with my fist, the pain inside ringing out immediately. Then, helplessness. Pay the price. Like in a fucking John Ford Western, or at the supermarket checkout? “Here”, I say to the cashier. “I want my freedom.” “Fine. Let’s see some cash”, says the cashier, pulling out a gun. And bam! Madness, madness, madness! Of course I realized that all the young protesters who had already lost their lives in Tunisia and Egypt must have had thoughts similar to Muhammad’s. Before these people had been something of an abstract mass for me. But now there was someone sitting there, at the computer, in Syria, who was confiding in me, and who was sending stark, heroic words over the data link to my address. The Arab Spring was coming closer. The whole thing was getting personal, getting under my skin, and into my already more-than-tense nervous system.

Muhammad had of course noticed my long silence.

<muhammad> You don’t have to say anything if you don’t want to, tomate. It’s more than enough for me to know that you’re there and listening. I really appreciate it. I can’t talk to my parents about all this. But they know what it’s like though. This is our life now. You just can’t talk about your fears every day, or you’ll go crazy.

<tomate> I don’t know what to say. I really don’t know. Thank you, Muhammad. Take care of yourself. And please, keep in touch.

<muhammad> I will.

One thing was now becoming very clear to me. Most people in these countries just wanted a normal life, especially the younger ones. Hatred of Christianity, or of the Western world in general, weren’t part of the deal. These people only wanted to live in peace, get an education, do their job, have a family, have some fun, be left alone. They didn’t want to have to believe in something that others were dictating to them. Today I know that this moment, Muhammad telling me that he was prepared to give his life, was one of the most important moments in my life. It has enriched me, and it has helped me move forward. With Muhammad’s help, I would understood that it isn’t enough to be active on the Internet, but that you need to take a stance against the injustice in front of your own doorstep, and go out into the real world too. My participation in the refugee demonstrations in 2012 on Pariser Platz, next to the famous Brandenburg Gate, was motivated by my experience with Muhammad, for instance.

My work with the Pirates, on the other hand, was politics. It was not activism. As an activist, you can change the world in miniature. Activism is more acute, and (usually) yields the faster result. And to be honest, activism probably suits me a lot better than politics. Politics is more frustrating. In politics, you can make a difference on a grander scale only if you have a lot of time and resilience and don’t tend towards pessimism and depression.

In any case, it was Muhammad’s Clint Eastwood quip that let me see how valuable the things were that I already had in my life – and that they were worth fighting for. Every second, every minute, and every day. Fall down. Fall down and get up again. Again and again. I was reminded of the words in this song by the Berlin band Soifass – “Sei stark” (Be strong). “Be strong, and then you’ll see, it will all go on somehow. Be strong – and then you’ll see!”

But for me to really understand, there was still one thing that had to happen. What could I have told Muhammad, in the end? That I wasn’t getting on with my life, that I was rushing through it like a man on the run? I couldn’t have told him that. It would have been embarrassing. It would have seemed silly, even to myself. For him, this was an existential matter. But all my problems in the end just seemed to make me a poor soul with a few kinks and holes in his head. In that moment, though, the only thing I
make me a poor soul with a few kinks and holes in his head. In that moment, though, the only thing I felt was a great deal of confusion and helplessness. I couldn't alleviate his fears. I was unable to save Muhammad, should the worst come to the worst. That certainty, of knowing you're unable to help, is a lousy feeling. Yes, we were supporting people with a few technical tricks and finesse. Was that enough? No, it was not enough, damn it. That couldn't ever be enough. But it was surely better than doing nothing at all.

I paced through the room, nervously dragging on my cigarette, thoughts swirling like paper planes in an air current. I decided to do everything I could in order to help Muhammad and all the other young Syrians in their shitty situation. In Tunisia and Egypt, our help had also checked out, after all. Both countries were on their best way to becoming democracies, despite all internal quarrels. And we at Telecomix had done our part. That was encouraging to me. We were going to help. Cost what it may. Cost what it may. From my point of view, the price I would pay for this support wasn't going to be that high. I was on the safe side. Or so I thought.
Making the Web, Even If Your Local Dictator Hates It

Muhammad got in touch almost every day. He talked about his life in Aleppo and the growing protests in Syria. I was fine holding off in these conversations, despite my at times egomaniacal character, always trying to dominate and control communication. The space we had established between us was for Muhammad. Or he was more in need of it, to cope with the stress that enshrouded him day after day. That I had accepted and understood. And so we became friends. If I had no word from Muhammad for three days (which didn’t happen very often), I would start to get nervous.

Our contact, and the developments in Syria which were noticeably picking up pace, had accelerated a specific process in me, which had already begun before with the events in Tunisia, and is somewhat hard to describe. I felt needed. A good feeling. But I was forgetting about myself more and more.

In retrospect, I realize that the life I had been leading until had destined me to lose myself. I had to lose myself in order to find myself.

In the following months, the protests became so much more radical and brutal than anyone had thought even then. March 2011 had still been a relatively quiet month for Syria. No one was concerned about the situation escalating. Instead it looked as if the same thing was being repeated in Syria as in Tunisia and Egypt before: As more and more people start protesting, the regime switches off the Internet, Telecomix jumps in, the government resigns, Assad retreats, and a transitional government with the aim of initiating democratic transition is installed. At Telecomix, we were selectively providing technical support, but this was hardly something to keep us busy around the clock entirely.

So though my self-preservation instincts were drilled on escapism and did what they could to keep me busy on the Internet, there was still time left. Time that had to be filled, so that it wouldn’t begin to torture me. By now I had been living with Thomas, Beckj and Sophi for almost three months. It was time to find a place of my own and get my life together. And indeed I managed to introduce myself for an apartment in Schönhauser Allee in upmarket Prenzlauer Berg, where I was greeted by two thirty-somethings. He was gangly, with cavernous eyes and a hipster pompadour, working in PR. She was petite, smart mouth and squeaky voice, doing something with graphic design. It felt like a job interview. What do you do? What goals do you have in life? I played along, said I was working for an Internet company and wanted to start my own business one day. Bla bla bla. The petite one stared at me the whole time with those narrow, poisonous eyes of hers, as if trying to x-ray me. The guy was taking notes, and occasionally took a sip of his apple spritzer, which he had prepared beforehand from unfiltered organic apple juice.

Of course, I didn’t get the room. But their pretentious manner and posturing left me in such a bad shock that I immediately lost any desire to carry on flat-hunting.

Instead, I got back in touch with the Berlin Pirates. I became a member of the “Seetiger” crew, which had a regular meet-up in a Friedrichshain bar called Jägerklause. Alex, who I hadn’t seen since my arrival in Berlin, was on board too. He had heard about my activities with Telecomix during the Arab Spring. “What you’ve set in motion there is quite something”, he said to me over a beer. “Cool idea with those modems. I’m proud of you, Stephan.” He raised his beer glass. “To the Revolution. ¡No pasarán!” I smiled sheepishly. I was mildly embarrassed and at the same time,
the Revolution. “No pasarán!” I smiled sheepishly. I was mildly embarrassed and at the same time, quite flattered.

Through Alex, I got to know a number of other great people. Lotte for example, a computer science student and Pirate, an awesome woman all round. I was out on a roll, discovering my new-found love for this so-called social life.

Telecomix had in fact become quite well-known within the net community. Words like “hero” were on the tip of everyone’s tongue.

To this day, I have my problems with this expression as it relates to our technical support. We had done our bit, we had contributed, but in a rather minimal way compared to what the protesters on the ground had accomplished. These demonstrators who were willing to risk their lives were the true heroes. But I’d be lying if I said that I hadn’t enjoyed the reverence and appreciation that was handed out to me.

Doubtlessly I felt pretty cool about myself. I was riding on a wave of euphoria, and that made it easier for me, who had been wrestling with other people all his life, to get along with others.

My life, however, kept refusing to get along with me. One morning, my boss came over to me. “Stephan, come with me into my office. We need to talk.” I knew what was coming. I knew I hadn’t been meeting the daily challenges posed by this online gaming magazine with a great deal of enthusiasm. I had been taking more care of my personal interests and Telecomix activities than of anything else, even during working hours. “You don’t have to say anything,” I said guiltily as I sat down in front of my boss. “I probably haven’t survived the probation period.” “That’s right, Stephan. You can pack your things together.” So I had screwed up. Everything was back to square one. I registered as unemployed, but decided not to go looking for a new job for the time being. I had been fired during the probation period, and would receive fairly decent unemployment benefits as these were oriented to my old salary from back in Frankfurt.

At the employment office, I simply registered as sick, so that I wouldn’t have to look for a new job and they couldn’t force me into one either. Then I resumed doing what I did best: aimlessly drifting through life.

My room-mate Thomas was travelling in the Himalayas in April, which meant I had the room to myself. There is one day I remember particularly well. The spring sunshine was bathing the whole apartment in a warm light. Sophi was sitting in the kitchen, cramming. I grabbed a mug of coffee, sat down at the table with my laptop, and started playing “World of Warcraft.” For hours I could run through this fantasy world, a sorceress striking down her enemies. Every now and then, Sophi would smile at me, and I would smile back. In fact, nothing special at all happened that day, it was simply the feeling of being very relaxed and at ease. Everything was so tranquil and pleasant. The hissing noise in my ears had gone. I was not alone. It was as if I had found a home.

Even if it was just the illusion of a home... But that hardly bothered me just then. Sometimes you need illusions, in order not to fall victim to madness.

In mid-April, I had my first appearance at the Berlin conference re:publica, which since 2007 has established a regular forum for debate for topics like the Web 2.0, Social Media, and the digital world in
established a regular forum for debate for topics like the Web 2.0, Social Media, and the digital world in general. The Arab Spring, and the role the Internet had played in it, was one of the main topics of the current event. For example, the Egyptian blogger Noha Atef was invited to speak about the revolution in her country. I had submitted a proposal to talk about decentralized clusters in my capacity as a Telecomix agent. This was the first presentation I was doing by myself, and I was super nervous. As a subtitle for my talk, I had thought of the following: "...making the Web – even if your local dictator hates it." My hypothesis: clubs and associations, action groups and working groups were, in Germany at least, very common, but cumbersome devices, which were rarely able to respond quickly to change or adapt to the dynamics of events. The activist group Telecomix, hailing from Sweden, presented an alternative. Based on our example, I wanted to explain the functioning of a decentralized cluster: secure and decentralized communication, fast decision-making procedures, and fulfilling, enjoyable work. "Telecomix has no directors or executives," it said in the announcement for my talk. "It just works." The announcement text was quite a mouthful: "This is an ever-expanding jellyfish cluster, and so the responsibilities of each individual agent are expanding too. What we need today is openness – openness to new ideas, new ways of working, new people. First of all, there is no wrong way to get the job done, only ways that are different from your own. This is to be absolutely respected, because without mutual respect, the cluster will not be able to work together in the long run." If I read this announcement or my lecture notes today, I can still sense the exuberant enthusiasm that I had cultivated in this matter. All of it sounds a bit like I was on drugs. Which is true in a way. I was high on dopamine, the messenger of bliss.

My enthusiasm hasn't evaporated entirely, but it has given way to a certain sense of disillusionment. Today, I would have said it all in a slightly more pragmatic way. While I do continue to believe in this form of decentralized work, back then, I was positively euphoric about it. Probably I was still under the impression that I could change the world – the big picture.

Meanwhile in Syria, the protests continued. By April, the number of demonstrators throughout the country was steadily increasing. A new government under Prime Minister Adel Safar had been sworn in, which then quickly decided to abolish the national state of emergency that had been prevailing since 1963. Even so, the protests didn't subside, on the contrary. Protesters were already calling for Assad's resignation, but Assad of course had no intention of vacating his throne. Finally, on April 22, 2011, tens of thousands of Syrians from all over the country gathered on the streets. Soldiers and militiamen shot sharp at the crowds. Until the end of April, another estimated 500 demonstrators would lose their lives in the protests. <muhammad> tomate. Hello. <tomate> Hi, Muhammad. What's going on? <muhammad> I was at a demo. It was terrible. The militia were shooting at us. <tomate> Damn. Are you all right? <muhammad> Yes. I wasn't hurt. But I'm still scared. I saw other young people being hit. Just falling over, from one second to the next. I looked into their lifeless eyes, staring up into the sky. I will never get these pictures out of my head. There were snipers and soldiers there. All we wanted was to demonstrate peacefully. But they're not going to shoot all of us, are they? They're not going to kill all of us? They're not allowed to do that. So they are going to have to stop at some point, right?
My heart felt like it was scrunching up into a ball, trying to hide inside me. That night, I couldn't get to sleep. Thousands of questions went spinning through my mind. In the middle of the night, I got up to open the window, and stared out into the clear night skies. I lit a cigarette and blew puffs of nicotine up towards the heavens, watched the clouds waft through the darkness for a while before they vanished. I picked up my phone and tweeted: "Now, for some sleep. Or whatever that's called"

The Telecomix crew started uploading video material from participants in the demonstrations, mostly showing heavily armed soldiers and dead protesters. These videos were sent to us over the Internet by our Syrian contacts. Before we republished them online, we removed the metadata from the video files, so that the origin of the recording became untraceable, or at least very, very difficult to trace. In mid-May, I attended the German national convention of the Pirate Party, this time in Heidenheim in the south of Germany, where I was elected head of the national party headquarters. I plunged into this new (volunteer) job head-first with loads of enthusiasm, and managed to get the office into shipshape. Apart from everyday office organization work, my tasks also included negotiating contracts for the federal party committee, as well as supporting the federal executive board as an assistant. The work suited me fine, because I could keep up with my Telecomix activities and my Internet life at the same time. Mr Urbach was back on all channels.

So finally, I was willing to do what grown-ups habitually like to demand of their wayward children: get my life back together. And at last it felt as if I might succeed. Which is not that easy if your head is stuck in a parallel universe most of the time... By now, the protests in Syria were in their third month. In Egypt meanwhile, a military government had taken over, and had started arresting and trying Mubarak's former henchmen. An official commission had been set up to investigate the violence committed against protesters during the Egyptian uprising. The National Democratic Party of Egypt, Mubarak's ruling party, had been disbanded, while the former dictator was being remanded in custody. But in Syria, Assad was still sitting on his dictator's throne with an ugly grin on his face. Early May saw the arrest of thousands of Syrian activists. Oppositional activists counted a total of 8,000 detainees. Eight thousand!

< muhammad> So many arrests, tomate. So many. Even some of my fellow students are in prison. And you know what happens there. They torture them, torment them with electric shocks. And some of the prisoners are just killed and buried somewhere.

< tomate> I'm so sorry to hear that. It really is terrible.

< muhammad> I'm pretty sure I'm being monitored. Yesterday, my father's boss said to him didn't he think it strange what his son was up to. My father told me later. Don't you see? That was a warning. They know what I'm doing. And now they're trying to pressurize me. Conventional tactic. If I don't give in, then...

< tomate> You really have to be careful. But you know that.

< muhammad> But I'm going to keep going. You know that, too. This is our best chance. The chance for my generation to make a difference. There is no way back. If we give up now, I will never forgive myself. Never.

Altogether, there must have been around fifteen to twenty Syrian activists cavorting about in the Telecomix channel at that time, who were all being taken care of in some way or another. I still don't know exactly which of our agents had been as closely in touch with which activists as Muhammad and I
know exactly which of our agents had been as closely in touch with which activists as Muhammad and I had been. But I did hear later that this had been the case. That these contacts occasionally weighed us down, that we were haunted by their worries and fears – that was something we agents never talked about among ourselves. We were the tough guys, remember, who showed no sign of weakness, who could cope with anything. Even John Wayne had nothing against us gun-slingers from the Wild Wild West of Supernerddom. Don't cry. Work!

That's what I stuck to. Or rather, what I held on to. Organizing the party office, making appointments, answering emails, sending emails, giving interviews, organizing interviews with Syrian activists for international news media, making phone calls, posting tweets, reassuring Muhammad, trying to understand and be there for him, living Berlin, meeting friends, debating with other Pirates, living my life, understanding myself, understanding anything, keeping cool, not losing it, staying on track – understanding the world, finding the world sucks, changing the world. I was watching myself coming and going, was, literally, in constant motion. Fourteen hours a day. Firing nonstop from all synapses. Yeah, baby!

I startled in my seat, sat up and rubbed my eyes, which were burning like hell. I must have fallen asleep in my desk chair. A quick glance at the computer screen. What was the time? 1:20 am. Damn. My fingertips and feet were tingling. A cigarette I had forgotten about had decomposed into a sad little heap of cold ashes in the ashtray. But the IRC channel was still active. The last line of my conversation with Muhammad said:

< muhammad> tomate. Hello. Answer me, please. Are you there? tomate! Are you still there? Are you all right?
Let's Meet in Better Times

I had started reading again. Mostly fantasy and science fiction stuff. And a little bit of politics, for brain power. I became particularly fascinated by *Shadow Elite – How the World’s New Power Brokers Undermine Democracy, Government, and the Free Market*, a book by the US cultural anthropologist Janine R. Wedel, that discusses policy-making and corruption worldwide. In this book, she examined how stockbrokers were recruiting politicians, entire governments, think tanks, businesses and media corporations for their personal interests, corrupting democratic decision-making in the process.

With equal enthusiasm I studied the work of British political scientist Colin Crouch. In his book *Coping With Post-Democracy*, he elaborates on some daring hypotheses regarding the Western model of democracy, which he explains has been weakened through lobbying, as well as increased mediatization and commodification. Crouch claims that the importance of elections and other democratic decision-making procedures is being undermined and made obsolete precisely because many politicians are no longer concerned with policy issues and actual political contents, but more with the marketing and media presence of their public persona. As a consequence, elections degenerate into PR shows. Decision-making is delegated to specialist committees and pundits, who in turn are influenced by lobby associations and enterprises themselves. On top of that, politics declines in popularity, and the commons collapses. In such a system, the impact of individual citizens’ democratic participation decreases, while the influence of more dubious interest groups increases. I had always seen the Internet as an opportunity, a way for citizens to participate in democracy and organize themselves more quickly and efficiently. Thanks to the Internet, regular citizens can connect immediately, join forces and coordinate to form protest groups, for instance. The Internet makes it very simple for citizens to contact their officials and MPs, to pepper them with questions and generally hold them accountable. In that sense, politicians today are under greater pressure to justify themselves. They are, on average, required to work more accurately, honestly and thoroughly – even if they are pestered by lobbyists and other interest groups at the same time. For the safeguarding of the individual and collective freedoms of democracy, therefore, the Internet is a true blessing, and I believe it should be protected from these flimsy excuses for control freakishness – perfidious surveillance technologies, uncontrolled hoarding of personal data, and other means of control. You may laugh at me for being a hopeless romantic, but this romantic love for the Internet, I will not have taken away from me. Datalove rules!

My mobile phone rang. I checked the display. It was Alex. I took off the headphones that were keeping all the human noise away from my soul, and answered the phone. “Hey, Stephan,” I heard Alex’s cheerful voice. “Have I got news for you. How would you like a place of your own?”

He had just co-founded a shared apartment in the Bänschstraße in Friedrichshain, and wanted me to move in with him. Of course I said yes. Fate was being kind to me. Sometimes it just pays out: giving something time, not pushing forward, and instead just waiting until fate rings at your front door.

With viirus, a young Pirate friend from Hockenheim, I travelled back to Hanau to sell off the old apartment which I had held on to all this time. Or rather, to declutter. In a matter of days, we managed to...
apartment which I had held on to all this time. Or rather, to declutter. In a matter of days, we managed to pile up 750 kg of waste and other bulky items. Without the help of Ungedanken and Prauscher, two friends of ours from Darmstadt, cleaning out my apartment would have been impossible. Packing, unpacking and repacking all this stuff had literally fried our brains. At the end, we could only talk about the joint monkey force that this huge task had required. Trained monkeys. That's what my friends looked like to me in that moment. Today I am ashamed for having let it come this far with my apartment.

Back in Berlin, some of the Berlin Pirates helped me move my furniture in. And then we celebrated. With pizza, beer, and punk music. Our apartment was conveniently located, just a step away from the hustle and bustle of Friedrichshain, in a quiet street with a Spätih right outside our front door. My room was 30 square meters, and even had a balcony, so I could just step outside whenever I needed some oxygen.

And that was exactly what I was going to need in the next few weeks, in large quantities. Towards the end of May, Iran had deployed special forces to Syria that were supposed to support Assad in his battle against the escalating protests. Amongst other things, the Iranians helped to locate Syrian activists through Facebook or Twitter so that they could be arrested. Meanwhile, dozens of people were being killed at each single one of these demonstrations. Some 800 people had already lost their lives in the riots. Apparently the Iranian regime was concerned that the protests might spill over into their country.

And the hits were coming closer, in fact. But the next level of escalation in Syria was already looming. Assad's henchmen were now fighting back the insurgents with tanks and helicopters, in the cities of Talbisa and Rastan, for instance. In mid-June, some 30,000 soldiers advanced on the crowd of protesters in the Syrian town of Jisr al-Shughur, in the north-west of the country.

Summer had arrived in Berlin – and in Libya, all hell had broken loose. British, French and US NATO forces had been flying attacks against Gaddafi's government forces since mid-March. Operation "Unified Protector" was meant to stop the regime alliances from gaining an upper hand in their battle against the rebels. Gaddafi's military had suffered some painful losses, although NATO hadn't yet succeeded in landing a decisive blow. Libya seemed to be declining into chaos.

It was warm outside on my balcony. Hot, humid months lay ahead of us. The nuclear energy phaseout had just been decided, and now the German public was worrying about the Euro rescue package ESM. And while I felt fortunate to have found at last a safe harbour with a room of my own, Muhammad's world was visibly collapsing.

Meanwhile, we at Telecomix were being sent several eye-witness videos a day. Some showed the most awful atrocities. I remember a video showing a young man, who most likely had been shot in the head. He was lying on the floor, his face unrecognisable. Everything was covered in blood. Men came running by, shouting, and carried him away, the booming noise of gunshots as a constant backdrop. The sound dug itself into my mind. Bam. Bam. Bam. We would soon get to see such horror videos more often. Videos of snipers picking off humans like cattle. Videos of people lined up, an entire row dropping to the ground under the fire of a machine gun. Videos of a troop transport truck driving straight into a crowd. Telecomix designed an online
Videos of a troop transport truck driving straight into a crowd. Telecomix designed an online platform for activists to upload these videos. Then we removed all geo-location data and possible device numbers, and pixellated the faces in the videos, so that the video's creators wouldn't be tracked and identified. Then we began uploading the video clips to YouTube. From that point on, they were frequently used in the Tagesschau, and in other news shows and journalistic articles.

Nobody at Telecomix identified as a journalist. We weren't journalists, and we neither had the training nor the skills to analyse the complex relationships in the Middle East in an editorial context. That just wasn't our job. We were just helping to make these videos and sources more available, more visible – images from a country where there could otherwise have been no images at all coming out, and therefore no primary sources. And journalists need sources. We simply connected these sources with the Western media and audience. In fact we were more like a journalists' toolbox.

Another major issue was of course the verifiability and authenticity of the material that we were providing and distributing online. We trusted the activists who were using our platform. And they trusted us. In the end, though, we couldn't guarantee that our tech support wasn't being abused, of course. But the journalists trusted us because we were close to the activists on the ground. To be honest, we didn't think verification was part of our job. We thought it an entirely journalistic task. That is not to make excuses for myself. But for us, what was most important was that we at least had some documentation of the atrocious crimes the Assad regime was committing.

Our form of support was bound to make us the target of Egyptian, Syrian, or some other intelligence services. To avoid possible self-heroization, I won't stress this too much, but of course we were concerned that someone might want to take revenge on us, or somehow teach us a lesson. Whatever way that might happen. In this respect, the operations in Syria had taken on a new quality for us. The Syrian secret service was notoriously feared, and we definitely respected them. After all, I had heard from Muhammad exactly what kinds of deeds they were capable of.

<muhammad> Today I was at a demonstration again, tomate. It's not as bad here in Aleppo as it is in other places. But I feel the violence is getting worse here too.

<tomate> They're already shooting in Aleppo too, though.

<muhammad> Yes. But it's still not quite as brutal here. For the time being. But the threats I am getting are more direct now...

<tomate> Shit. Who's this coming from?

<muhammad> At the demo today, this guy came over to me. He was maybe about 30. He said: We know who you are. You had better take care of yourself. Before I could say anything, he had disappeared back into the crowd. And then my cell phone started ringing. Unknown caller
I picked up, and a male voice said: You should stop playing the hero. Even heroes can fall. And then the voice was gone. I'm scared, tomate. But I'm going to keep going.

<tomate> I know, Muhammad.

<muhammad> You have given me hope, tomate. It's worth so much to me that there are people like you from Telecomix. You can understand. We can talk to you. Not like Anonymous. They always seemed so inhuman to me. But you, you are human. And that's why you are doing a good thing.

<tomate> It's kind of you to say that.

<muhammad> Don't forget about us. We are all brothers and sisters. We are all human. Don't forget us. Let's meet in better times, tomate.

<tomate> Let's meet in better times, Muhammad.

Let's meet in better times. This was to become our farewell phrase. Sometime in the future, Muhammad said, he would come to visit all the Telecomix agents he had encountered. He wanted to thank us in person. “Once this is all over,” he said.

That was hardly foreseeable. Quite the contrary. It was getting tricky, no question about that. The entire country had been in revolt against Assad for too long. In the city of Hama, around half a million people were demonstrating. Mid-July saw the largest protests, scattered over numerous cities in Syria, since the beginning of the uprising. Dozens of people were killed by snipers and missiles every day. So far more than 12,000 people had been arrested. Deserted soldiers and civilians jointly founded the “Free Syrian Army”. Syria was starting to burn.

And the sparks from this vicious fire, already threatening to spread uncontrollably, were drifting all the way to Europe.

Okhin, our agent in France, was the first of us to receive a direct threat. On the telephone. Our phone numbers were indeed easy to find on the Internet. At least for those of us listed as the media contact persons for their respective countries. And Okhin was one of those people. He only mentioned the call offhandedly while chatting in our #ops channel, a private chat room we had set up for the inner circle of Telecomix agents, mainly because the public channel was currently so crowded. “The guy told us to be careful. He said they knew about Telecomix, knew where the members lived. When I asked who he might be, he hung up on me.” Okhin was dismissive of the threat. “Had to happen at some point,” he wrote. “At least now we know that we are being taken seriously.” This event didn't exactly cause a breakout of paranoia, but it definitely left a somewhat stale and creepy taste behind, in my case anyway. Big bad brother is watching you.
I was already running late for my meeting with Alex, but noticed I was hungry. Sometimes chocolate and cigarettes just aren't enough to quench your appetite. When I arrived at Alexanderplatz station, I rushed down the stairs, then dashed over to the snack bar on the other side of the road and joined the queue. Slime's cover version of an old Ton Steine Scherben classic was blasting from my headphones, Wir müssen hier raus – “We have to get out of here”:

We've got to get out of here. This is hell. We're living in a penitentiary.

We were born to be free.

We are but two of millions, we are not alone.

And we're going to make it, we're going to make it!

I was nodding my head to the beat and looking at my phone, sending Alex a message that I would be late, when I felt a hand on my shoulder. I turned around to face a young man, slim, dark-haired, maybe twenty years old. He looked at me earnestly and motioned with his hand that he wanted to tell me something. Perplexed, I took off my headphones, though I could still hear a trace of the chorus, sung in Dicken Jora's angry voice: “We are born... to be free ...” “What,” I said in his general direction.

“I'm supposed to deliver a message,” he said, unflinchingly. His German was good, but he had a slight accent that I couldn't place. “You should watch out. They know who you are. And you shouldn't be interfering in matters that are none of your business.” He gave me a serious look, before he turned around and simply ran off. In a daze, I watched him disappear, without the idea of following him crossing my mind. I was so perturbed by the encounter that for a second, I literally forgot where I was. Until the saleslady woke me from my stupor: “Young man! What are you having?” “Um, uh,” I stammered, “the salmon sandwich over there.” I made my way into the subway, sandwich in hand, thoughts racing in my mind. Then it occurred to me: I didn't even like salmon. If it had to be fish, I'd only have deep-fried. So why had I ordered salmon? My heart began to pound. My hands were sweaty. Not because of the salmon, obviously. Cautiously I had another quick look around.

It took a while for the reality of what had just happened to sink in. “It was clearly a threat,” Alex said tersely, as we sat down opposite each other in the café. “Stephan, man. You really need to be careful. This isn't a game that you're playing here. You're messing with powerful people. With powerful, insane people who have no scruples whatsoever. Don't you think it's all a bit much for you, too? This kind of threat should be taken seriously, in any case.” I stared at him like a deer caught in the headlights on a country road.

“Fine. I am taking it seriously,” I mumbled.

From that minute on, I became much more careful when I was out on the streets by myself, and not just in Berlin either. If it wasn't to be avoided, I took a taxi. So yes, it did seem as if something like paranoia was gradually taking hold of me. I tried to fight it, tried to console myself. “It's gonna be fine, in the end,” I told myself. “They have better things to do than pressurize some nerd from Berlin just to teach him a lesson. That would only lead to bad press...” Did the long arm of Assad really reach all the way to Berlin? It did, without a
lead to bad press...” Did the long arm of Assad really reach all the way to Berlin? It did, without a question. And concrete proof for that was to follow a few months later: In late December 2011, the Green party politician and human rights activist Ferhad Ahma, member of the Syrian opposition’s National Council, was mugged and assaulted in his Berlin home.

But I also have to admit that I felt slightly flattered by the threat. It showed that Telecomix was being taken seriously by the Assad regime, that our work and actions were meaningful, and that they had apparently hit the regime right where it hurt. Stephan Urbach, enemy of the state. I grinned at the thought, and sat down at my laptop to report the incident to my fellow agents. After some discussion, the following mode of operations emerged: “Take them seriously, but not too seriously. We will not be intimidated. The Syrian people need us. And they’ve got a load of other problems.”

So we decided not to make the threats public, in order to prevent drawing even more attention to ourselves. Although these ominous occurrences did spark an expected debate. We discussed how far we were prepared to go in the case of Syria. When would we be forced to acknowledge: That’s it, we are not going any further? If one of our agents was beaten up? If one of the activists that we knew was arrested or worse, killed? Which price were we willing to pay? There it was again: the question of price. How high should it be, how high would it be? We didn’t have the answers, and so we resolved to keep going as before for the time being. The Syrian people needed us, after all. And we didn’t want to let them down. Those agents who wanted to get out because it was simply getting too much were supported and encouraged to do so.

I decided not to tell Muhammad anything about the incident at Alexanderplatz. He had enough worries of his own, and I didn’t want to burden him more than I had to. He probably would have broken off contact altogether in order not to put me in more danger. And I didn’t want that to happen. I wanted to help, yes. I wanted to be strong, like a knight, not frightened and cowardly.

What really helps against paranoia is information, I thought to myself. And so I decided to compile some more information on how Syrian intelligence agencies were organized, to find out whether the threat I had received was typical of the Syrian secret service, or Political Security Directorate. This ominous office was mostly concerned with the monitoring of international media. From a few local experts, whom some Pirate acquaintances had put me in touch with, I learned that this type of threat is quite common. You just give some guy 150 Euros and tell him to deliver your message. This info only made me feel more nervous. Suppression helps. I was an expert on that. It was something I had learned to do. And so again, I buried myself in my work so that my thoughts wouldn’t go elsewhere on one of their gloomy outings.

And work was currently available in abundance, because of the upcoming elections for the Berlin House of Representatives in September 2011. As head of the party office, I already had my hands full, organizing press events in the local office, making and distributing election posters, etcetera. This was where I could live out my own dictatorial tendencies, bossing around the fifteen volunteers and interns under my command. But the threat level had been notably increasing since July 2011: Although there were no more personal threats to individual agents, we started receiving more or less identical emails, which were being sent to info@werebuild.eu, Telecomix’ public email address. The emails came from spoofed (that is, faked) senders, and they
Telecomix' public email address. The emails came from spoofed (that is, faked) senders, and they were all written in English. The contents was short and to the point. “Don’t interfere in matters that are none of your business.” “Remember one day you could end up in hospital.” “You should think of your families.” “We know the people you know in Syria.”

The more of these kinds of emails you are sent, the more dulled to their effects you become. And finally, you start making fun of this absurd email melodrama, which of course also helps in terms of reassurance and repression.

Still a feeling of unease remained, a visceral sensation like an ulcer settling in my belly. The more of these gory videos I watched, the more my mind was displaced to Syria, the more trouble I had getting to sleep in this madness. the more intrusive this ulcer became, triggering a vicious cycle of paranoia with its poisonous spikes.

I felt a bead of sweat trickle down my forehead and cheek. The drop fell and landed in the ashtray beside my laptop, in a pile of ashes and cigarette butts. I looked in the ashtray to count the stubs. I stopped counting at twenty. I tried to pull myself together, and just sat there gazing out through the open balcony door. The birds were singing. Orange sunlight was sliding across the floorboards. The sun was rising. My head was aching badly. How long had I been sitting there, in front of my computer? Eight hours, ten hours? And how many videos had I edited? I didn't really know. Maybe twenty? Thirty? I recalled countless people running around, the noise of gunfire, the blood-stained body armours, the screaming and screaming, and more screaming. My throat was parched, my mouth was full of the rotten taste of cold nicotine and old beer. I stood up to grab a bottle of water from the table, and took a careful sip. I rubbed my eyes, stretched, and suddenly felt a sharp pain in my back, tugging all the way down to my left leg. I sat down to massage my sore limbs. The pain slowly evaporated until it had disappeared altogether. Was I awake? I was finding it difficult to be sure, and I decided to postpone the answer to this question. My whole body felt old – old and tired and exhausted, heavy like a pile of granite, leached out like an old sponge. I listened to the birds singing, and watched the morning light gently crawl across the roof of the house next door. Even the night hadn't cooled the world down much. The balcony door was wide open, yet there was no draft or cool breeze wafting in, just muggy dampness and stale, stagnant air. I got up, picked up the laptop from my bed and set it down on my desk. I stared at the screen intently, as if hoping it would present me with the answers I was looking for: What was I doing here? In that exact moment, the cursor in the chat window I was using for my conversation with Muhammad began to move.

<muhammad> Are you still awake, tomate?
<tomate> I don't know. I think so. I've been sitting at my computer for hours, editing videos, forgetting everything around me. I feel like I'm dreaming. Totally surreal.
<muhammad> I know what you mean. I sometimes feel as if I'm in a movie myself. I can hardly sleep. A thousand thoughts are racing through my head.
<tomate> Same here, really. But at least I'm in safety. Here in beautiful Germany. lol...
<muhammad> I'm really getting worried. At a lot of the demos, people are now resorting to violence against the secret service and police forces. Probably quite a few of them were even killed. It's not a good sign.
<tomate> But it was to be expected. Violence leads to more violence. And people have every reason to fight back.
muhammad: I know what you mean. Still, I reject the violence. It doesn't gain us any confidence with those who are still trying to fight our movement. Violence is discouraging, and it does generate even more violence. Even in places you would never have expected. This is all extremely dangerous. If we want to fight for freedom, it can only be done peacefully.

tomate: I think it's good that you think like that. But I'm not a pacifist, myself. When a state is this violent, against its own citizens, they have the right to fight back, in order to establish a more liberal system. I also think everyone has the right to protect themselves and their families.

muhammad: You're right, tomate. In a way. But I don't want to have to arm myself, and shoot at my countrymen. For how are we going to live together in future, after we have killed one another? That would be such a burden on any new system. And there is no Nelson Mandela, here in Syria.

tomate: And no Gandhi either...

muhammad: True. I always drew inspiration from the demonstrations in East Germany in 1989. Toppling a regime, but through peaceful protests – that has to be the goal.

tomate: We were lucky, at the time, that the Soviets didn't feel like sending tanks, and that the DDR government was so completely incapacitated. I don't think you can compare that to the situation in Syria. And remember the protests in China in 1989 and the massacre in Tiananmen Square. The Chinese leadership tried to crack down on the protests at all costs. They were even prepared to sacrifice more than 2,500 lives. That sounds more like Syria to me. And so maybe, to prevent a massacre, you have to arm yourselves.

muhammad: I respect your opinion, my friend. But I cannot support violence. No way. I would be betraying myself.

tomate: And I'm not trying to convince you either. I have no right to do that. I think I really have to get some sleep now. I'll try to, anyway. Let's meet in better times.

muhammad: Thank you, tomate. Let's sleep and dream a little. Let's meet in better times.
Four hours. That's how long I managed to sleep. Restless and wild, like I'd been in a fight. Me against the pictures in my head. Me against my own dreams. Me against myself. My head kept spinning. There was no point in trying to turn it off. Alex had made breakfast: Scrambled eggs with bacon. Hangover breakfast. I did have a hangover, but it wasn't from drinking alcohol. I had hardened myself enough due to the large amounts of alcohol I consumed while working at my computer. But these cruel images from the videos were something else, something I could not just get used to. I had tried to think of them as a mere medium, tried pushing out the horror they expressed. Without success. Today I know there was no escaping those images. They settled in my subconscious and continued to fester away in my gut, which in turn made me lose even more sleep. I tweeted:

“At least my heart is still beating. Let a new day begin.”

“You look like shit,” said Alex, grinned, and handed me a plate of scrambled eggs. “Yeah, long night,” I stammered, taking a sip of coffee. My glasses were so grubby that I found myself looking at a world with no clear outlines, like the inside of a hazy cloud. I ran my fingers through my hair. It felt sticky and greasy. Personal hygiene had indeed suffered in the course of my perpetual activism. I didn't care about my appearance – hardly anyone saw me face to face anyway. Only now did I realize that I smelled of sweat, no actually, I stank. I had been neglectful of my own body. I had forgotten how to take care of myself. I hadn't told Alex much about Telecomix' activities in Syria yet. I just couldn't. I could handle it (or so I thought), sitting in front of the computer for hours on end, working like a cyber-zombie, editing and uploading videos. But what I couldn't handle was this normal communication with my flatmate: just telling him what I was doing, or even how I was doing. So how was I doing? No idea, to be honest. Not so peachy, I guess. “Getting there,” I said to Alex. Never expose yourself. Never surrender. I wasn't one of those wimps you always read and hear about, I told myself. The ones who collapse and just can't take things any more, who quite literally burn out. No, I certainly wasn't one of those guys.

Without Alex, I probably would have starved during that time, or died of vitamin deficiency. Apart from chocolate, I don't recall eating any actual food while sitting in front of my computer. I was picking at my scrambled eggs. Alex looked at me questioningly. He simply didn't know what to do with me. And how could he? I didn't know myself. “Have you thought about it, though,” he asked, “whether you want to apply for the Camp?” “Camp?”, I inquired drowsily. Then I remembered what he was talking about. I had considered applying as a speaker for the Chaos Communication Camp 2011, with an improved and extended version of the lecture that I had already held at re:publica once before, under the heading: “Decentralized Clusters – Making the net, even if your local dictator hates it!” The Camp was to take place at an open-air aviation museum in Finowfurt, in the North-East of Germany in Brandenburg. From August 10-14, 2011, some 3,500 hackers, net activists and nerds, hailing from 45 countries around the world, would be coming together at the invitation of the legendary Chaos Computer Club (CCC), to hear a variety of talks and participate in debates. The Camp consists of a large camping ground where participants can pitch up their tents, and to counter the more serious events, also celebrate parties and generally have lots of fun for days on end. The CCC provides the entire infrastructure, including Internet and electricity, capacious circus tents for the main talks and discussions, and of course, drinks to quench the thirst of all these nerds. The participants additionally organize themselves in so-called Villages, where independent events to do with the Internet and net culture are also occasionally hosted. The first CCC camp took place in 1999, and since then it has been held regularly every four years in different locations in Germany.
It had always been a dream of mine to participate in this Camp. I certainly had an incredible amount of respect for the CCC, this "galactic community of life forms". They were quite simply the heroes of my youth. It was their Datenklo that had brought me my first access to the data networks. And now, with my current work for Telecomix, I finally had the opportunity to apply for a talk of my own. But I didn't dare to. I was apprehensive about speaking in front of all these famous hackers and activists, about making a good impression. The thought of giving a presentation there appealed to me, but it also filled me with a great deal of anxiety and awe. "I'm really not sure, Alex," I said. "I'm kind of scared... I'm just going to embarrass myself." "Oh nonsense. Stephan, I know you can do it. You are really onto something there with Telecomix, you know." He had a point, certainly. But the whole hero worshipping that was happening online wasn't really making me feel any more comfortable. It triggered feelings of discomfort because I felt under constant pressure to live up to expectations, to our responsibility to help the Syrian people. Day after day, week after week.

"You can do it, Stephan," Alex insisted, giving me a look as if trying to hypnotize me. "All right, fine. I'll apply. But they aren't going to pick my talk anyway." I bucked up, and sat back down at my computer to discuss my plans with the Telecomix agents. I thought it only fair to tell them that I was planning to showcase the idea behind Telecomix. But no one there actually disliked the idea of me applying for the Camp. No, they were all encouraging me. "Yeah, tomate. Let's do it." "Rock it, baby!" "You are the right person to make it happen."

On top of that, around fifteen to twenty agents, including jwalk, okhin, etu and maradydd, announced they would be coming to the Camp themselves. And so we decided to set up a Village of our own for Telecomix. Telecomix, this loose association that already meant so much to me, would finally meet in person, in the middle of nowhere in Brandenburg. I would spend a few days with them, chatting, drinking, getting to know them all individually. The thought of it delighted me. What delighted me less was the camping itself. I hated camping. I hated being out in the countryside. Well, I had no choice but to get through that, for better or worse.

So I typed up a short text as an application which I then sent to the Chaos Computer Club. Just a few days later I already had the reply – against all odds, I had been accepted. "Told you so," Alex said succinctly when I showed him the email. I was pleased. But at the same time, a sense of trepidation set in. Stephan Urbach at the Chaos Communication Camp. Phew! Anxiety was on the rise, again. And fear, plain and simple, fear of embarrassing myself and failing. I needed to prepare the talk, listen to Muhammad and support him, save Syria, and on top of all that, deal with the paranoia that was following me around like a gloomy shadow. Now, every time my mobile phone rang, I would check the display to see if I recognized the caller's number. I never used to do that, not before the incident at Alexanderplatz at least.

The fact that more and more people were being arrested in Syria made us at Telecomix more and more suspicious. Of course, these were in large parts demonstrators who were literally being picked up off the streets. But now we were hearing reports that activists were being tracked down and arrested in their own homes. This could only mean one thing: Syrian intelligence agencies had found a way of tracking down undesirable individuals on the Internet. Which in turn meant that the secret service had succeeded in professionalizing their online surveillance techniques. We already had the information that experts from Iran were assisting Assad's minions. We also had the suspicion that some special eavesdropping software had been deployed here – one that could read emails, scan dissidents' computers for specific keywords, or even listen to Internet-aided phone conversations. So we set out to find proof of this sort of surveillance infrastructure. My apologies for omitting the details of our research at this point. Let's just say that the technical means we used on our quest were, well, not exactly workaday, and that we recommend not to try this at home.

It was during this investigation, which we conducted alongside our regular Telecomix activities for a few weeks, that we discovered that there was a filter built in to the Syrian backbone. This main branch of the Syrian Internet, operated by the Syrian Telecommunications Establishment (STE), or Syrian Telecom for short, was where end-user data from all over the country came together. And in this backbone, we found about fifteen proxies of the type SG-9000 that belonged to the US-based company
backbone, we found about fifteen proxies of the type SG-9000 that belonged to the US-based company Blue Coat Systems Inc., well known for developing digital security systems and surveillance technology. There is a market for these kinds of proxy systems, of course. But in practice, it's not for everybody. Remember, there were international sanctions in place against the Syrian regime. In other words: The Syrians were using Western technology to spy on their own citizens, and ultimately punish those who were fighting for more Western liberties in their country. Despicable. Upsetting. Absurd. And those high and mighty guidelines that US companies had agreed upon in form of a “Global Network Initiative” in 2009, which were supposed to regulate trade agreements with authoritarian states... a joke.

Until that point, we hadn't considered active hacking to be our main task. We were acutely aware that with this action, we had crossed an imaginary line. So far, we had only helped set up Internet connections abroad, and handed out a couple of vital tips for activists, so that they could use the Internet securely and maintain their freedom of speech. But in our current investigation, we were infiltrating the telecommunications network of a sovereign nation. In Germany, this kind of data collection is discussed in § 202a (Data Espionage) of the German Criminal Code (StGB). And I quote:

(1) Whosoever unlawfully obtains data for himself or another that were not intended for him and were especially protected against unauthorised access, if he has circumvented the protection, shall be liable to imprisonment not exceeding three years or a fine.

(2) Within the meaning of subsection (1), above data shall only be those stored or transmitted electronically or magnetically or otherwise in a manner not immediately perceivable.

When we broke into the Syrian backbone, we managed to collect some 54 gigabytes of logfiles, all pertaining to the Blue Coat proxy systems. Of course, the fact that we were able find this data at all confirmed our suspicions that the Syrian secret services were still not all that capable in the IT department. Frankly, these Blue Coat systems stood open like barn doors. We just had to jump in and grab what we need.

But what is a logfile exactly? Nothing more than a digital register that keeps track of what an individual user is doing on the Internet: this includes the websites visited together with the time and duration of the visits, the date, contents and recipients of emails and messages, and so on. Most importantly, these logfiles also include the user's IP address, which can lead investigators right to the door of the house where the computer is installed. So this data was in fact a documentation of how Internet traffic in Syria was being monitored, filtered and blocked. And what did these logfiles look like? Here are some examples, the first from the category "Observed". The categories are all listed in the pertinent Blue Coat manual, which is available on the Internet if you are interested.

2011-08-02 07:46:34 1 0.0.0.0 - - - OBSERVED "unavailable"
http://m.facebook.com/home.php?refid=0 200 TCP_HIT GET image/png http://static.ak.fbcdn.net 80 /rsrc.php/v1/yz/r/9LoyWtxbXTT.png - png "Mozilla/5.0 (SymbianOS/9.2; U; Series60/3.1 NokiaE66-1/410.21.010; Profile/MIDP-2.0 Configuration/CLDC-1.1 ) AppleWebKit/413 (KHTML, like Gecko) Safari/413" 82.137.200.45 440 594 -

I'll try and explain this gibberish: On August 2, 2011, a user from a certain IP address (zeroed out here) tried to access Facebook. While the website is still displayed to the user (or in this particular case, an image on the Facebook website), a covert warning is sent to authorities. Quite likely the Syrian regime would later process or investigate these files further for their own purposes. Here is another example, from the "Policy Denied" category:
This entry describes how access to a specific website was denied using a so-called filter alarm. The user was presented with an error message after trying to access the page. As you can see in the logfiles above, the IP addresses of the devices that were originally called were removed. So the IP addresses you still see listed in these logs are the calling devices (So 82.137.200.45 is a router IP). You can also still see the URL and the user agent in question listed in the files. In the case above, the website rendered unavailable was skype.com.

54 gigabytes of this kind of data is a lot of stuff, and we had to learn how to categorize the material before we could publish the files. Therefore, at this point, I have to jump ahead in my story a little bit – we wouldn't be able to launch the actual public release of these logfiles until early October 2011. This would gain us a lot of attention later, on the Internet and in the media. After the release, Blue Coat Systems would publicly confirm that the Syrian government had indeed been using their software to monitor Internet traffic. But they claimed they had no idea how the Syrian side might have got hold of these tools. Blue Coat denied all accusations of having sold their products to the Assad regime despite the embargo. In a later statement, the company claimed that these systems had been shipped to Dubai in 2010, from where they had supposedly been dealt to Iraq. But how Assad's government had come into possession of their software, no one knew, apparently. There would be an inquiry into the matter, naturally.

Shortly after the release of the logfiles, the US Internet activist Jacob Appelbaum spoke up. He criticized Telecomix for not sufficiently anonymizing the logfiles. He said that by looking at user agent names and at query strings, it was possible to connect distinct data points and thereby identify and potentially endanger individual users. We argued that the logfile data came straight from the Syrian regime, but Appelbaum was not convinced. I will admit here that we didn't work reliably enough in that respect. Even so, for the very first time we were able to prove that overarching Internet monitoring and surveillance was happening in a country that was not China, Iran or North Korea.

Hard- and software from our so-called “civilized world” – this was clearly and unambiguously the embodiment of that nightmarish spectre of data retention and access blocking, not just in theory, but in brutal practice. So what's the lesson learned? To me, it's that trading this sort of advanced surveillance technology to autocratic regimes is just as dangerous as selling weapons. These technologies are used to identify activists and dissidents. Who could then be arrested, prosecuted, tortured, or killed. Unlike the arms trade, the export of surveillance technologies is not subject to any kind of regulation. Section 6 of the German “War Weapons Control Act” explicitly prohibits arms deliveries to states in which “there is danger of the war weapons being used for an act detrimental to peace, especially for a war of aggression.”

I am convinced that we need the same kind of rules and regulation for technologies that are capable of monitoring, suppressing or manipulating human communications. Cutting off an entire population from universal global communication systems is an act of violence, one that should be prevented by all means possible. And seeing as the governments of the Western world were proving unable to accomplish that, we at Telecomix had decided to take matters into our own hands – in order to increase the pressure on Western governments and businesses to outlaw this kind of technology trade with dangerous regimes. An article in Forbes magazine that highlighted our group's contributions quoted Brett Solomon, president of Access Now, an organization working on human rights issues for the digital age. About our latest activities, Solomon said: “It crosses a line we wouldn't be comfortable crossing. But sometimes it takes someone like Telecomix to put a spanner in the works.”
The research we had conducted for this campaign took us from late July until about mid-August 2011. Once we had our proof, we made sure that Syrian Internet users were notified and warned about the surveillance. We managed to intercept Internet traffic from Syria with a warning message that appeared whenever a Syrian user tried to view a web page on Google or Facebook. Instead of the requested page, a black background was displayed, upon it the following warning in Arabic: “This is an intended, temporary Internet breakdown. Please read the message below carefully, and spread the information: Your Internet activity is being monitored.”

This intro page took users to a second page, in white, where we had compiled a range of technical tips and tricks for using the Internet securely and sidestepping surveillance, for example by installing software like TrueCrypt or TOR. In the header, we had placed our logo: a star surrounded by an Omega sign, floating over a pyramid. The pyramid is engulfed in lightning. Underneath the logo, it said: This is Telecomix. We come in peace.

The operation had cost us a lot of time and energy, not to mention brainpower, while in Syria, the furious protests were developing into a full-blown war against the civilian population. On July 31, 2011, this resulted in the so-called Ramadan Massacre in the city of Hama. Military and security forces advanced with tanks to take over the city, a known stronghold of the resistance. The sorry outcome: 136 dead. August 1 marked the beginning of the Muslim fasting month Ramadan, which the opposition saw as an opportunity to expand the nationwide protests. The regime, frantically trying to break the demonstrators’ willpower, reacted with increasingly brutal counter-attacks. The city of Dair az-Zaur in eastern Syria had been occupied by armoured divisions. People were dying everywhere. And we were just watching. And I mean that exactly the way I said it. For recently, we had also started receiving videos from another source – namely, defectors who were formerly with Assad’s security apparatus, and had now changed sides to support the protesters. In their videos, you could always see some secret service agent or police officer beating another man, tied to a chair. One of these men was beaten up so badly that he fell onto the stone floor of the interrogation room and collapsed, chair and all. In one case, we even received a video that showed one of the activists who had been active on the Telecomix channel. He was tortured by some of these thugs, and then killed by a shot in the neck. Some Syrian activists simply disappeared from our chat room, without us ever finding out why. Had their computers broken down? Were they no longer in need of us? Had they been killed? The only thing you can do about this kind of uncertainty is to try and live with it. But it creeps around inside you like a cancer, constantly thriving, feeding on these vile images. I don't wish to describe these terrible images in all their disgusting detail. I also find it hard to describe what this does to you – looking at these kinds of videos, again and again. Is it as if you were watching a movie? As if you were part of some gruesome computer game? I find it really hard to tell. The actual watching of scenes of gunshot or torture is still emotional. It makes you want to cry, it makes you want to scream, or break something, just to get rid of all the madness, all the things you can't understand. But after that, you pull yourself together. Get yourself in working order. Liberate these videos from their treacherous metadata, upload them for the world to see what Assad is doing to his own people. So in the end, what's left is just to push out the emotions, displace them, suppress them, and get back to work. Suppressing, working, suppressing, functioning.

I sent out another tweet into the world: Drinking to feel better
In hindsight, it's more than obvious that I would have needed professional help. Support in processing what I'd seen and learning how to deal with it. People who work with organizations like Amnesty International are confronted with extreme situations like this almost every single day of their working life, and they usually receive psychological support accordingly, to help them cope with all the madness. We had no form of psychological supervision. We were nothing but a decentralized cluster which thrived on the strength of its individual members. But this strength seemed to be seeping out of us gradually in this vortex of self-exploitation. I was sleeping very little, too little – in early August 2011, at the height of our activities, not more than two or three hours a day. Lack of sleep is a killer for body and mind alike. Not only does your body grow as heavy as a lead weight, your thoughts do even more so. And I'd never been one of those happy-go-lucky kids in the first place. In others, I find melancholy more attractive than a constant grin and hyperventilating cheerfulness. I am a child of melancholy. That had always been the case. But melancholy does not inevitably cause depression. Melancholy is something you can live with, as long as you know how to use it for inspiration and vitality. Just think of all the wonderful films, songs, poems and books that have emerged from this spirit of melancholy, which is nothing but beautiful suffering at the hands of the world.

All this, of course, I hadn't realized at the time. I couldn't be alone for more than a minute without these dark thoughts creeping up again, questioning the meaningfulness of my whole existence, stirring up that old feeling of emptiness, swamping my mind with poisonous smoke grenades. The next day, the future, all that no longer mattered. I only had to endure the present. Some way or another. But there was only one way that I knew of: getting back to my computer immediately. In order to fight back these gloomy thoughts, I began working even harder than before, making the sleep deprivation even worse. For the first few days, the additional release of dopamine makes sure you still feel wide awake and energized. But disillusionment soon follows. Body and mind exhaust more and more quickly, at some point you start shivering uncontrollably, your eyesight diminishes, and you develop symptoms of fever. Fever is your body's way of telling you that your hopes have contracted a malicious infection. I felt an insane amount of pressure, further exacerbated by the fact that I was indeed chasing after some of the recognition that my Internet activism was garnering. I liked being acknowledged. It was all the reward we were getting for all our hard and challenging work. And so I kept up the level of activity, just to keep it coming. Because you are only truly on the Internet if you actively participate, I found. As soon as you stop participating, the recognition ebbs away, and as a result, so do you. For people like me, people who feel at home on the Internet, that feeling can be very hard to bear. Today, I am much better at coping with it, but back then, this vicious circle had sneakily manoeuvred me into a dead end. And of course, there was my friend Muhammad, who had more than enough problems of his own.

<muhammad> Please tell the people not to forget the blood of these innocent children who are dying as martyrs. Tell them not to forget the tears of their parents. The tears of their friends. Please do not forget about all these innocent people. We are all brothers and sisters. Humans. I'm not saying this to any government, but to the average person out there, because those are the people I believe in. The governments of the world have abandoned us. That's disappointing. But perhaps that's going to change too, one day. I don't want to remind you again of how terrible everything is here... I have a different question.

<tomate> Shoot, Muhammad. I'm listening.

<tomate> You know how dangerous that is, Muhammad. Skype isn't safe. And I have a really bad feeling about this. We really shouldn't. You know the secret service could be monitoring everything we
feeling about this. We really shouldn't. You know the secret service could be monitoring everything we

< muhammad> Yes, I know. But it would mean so much to me. Just this one time. And we wouldn't

have to talk for long. Nothing is going to happen.

I was not comfortable at all with the idea of talking to Muhammad over a Skype video call. But

somehow I couldn't refuse. I had the impression that Muhammad no longer knew what he could talk to

me about. He was running out of topics. The fact that he was afraid, that he was scared that the

situation in his country could explode any minute, that was clear enough to both of us as it was. Maybe

he just needed to break out of this depressing monotony, to see something else for a change, to find

distraction from the problems that surrounded him day by day like a prison. That he would only get to

see me, Stephan Urbach, a bedraggled stranger at breaking point, seemed to be beside the point for

Muhammad. So I agreed, but like I said, I had a damn bad feeling about it. After having done some

technical research for Telecomix, I was well aware of what Assad's henchmen were capable of.

We made a date for an evening in early August, for 9 pm Central European Time, which was 11 pm in

Aleppo. I could feel the apprehension, and lit a cigarette to calm myself down. The characteristic Skype

ring tone resounded at 9 pm sharp. I let it ring, once, twice, three, then four times. Then I pressed

"Accept". The image unfolded. The connection was much better than I'd expected. I could see a young

man with short dark hair. He probably hadn't shaved for days. Muhammad had a slim face and big

round eyes, tired eyes sunk deep into their sockets. Like a skeleton. I could actually see his

exhaustion. Even in the dim light, I could see his complexion was pale and almost grey in colour.

"Hello," Muhammad said straight away. "Good to see you."

"Hi," I replied warily. I didn't really know what to say. The whole notion that this video chat would turn out

to be a terrible idea was making me nervous and therefore uncommunicative. I must have been

making a rather severe impression on Muhammad, who then twisted his mouth into a delicate smile, a

reassurance. A few seconds passed without either of us saying a word. We just stared at each other. I

felt awkward puffing away at my cigarette, desperately looking for something to hold on to in that tiny

little eat-in kitchen of ours, for something else, anything else to fix my gaze on to. To no avail. "Thank

you for your work", Muhammad finally said. "Yeah, don't worry about it," I mumbled. "Don't mention it."

Still, I was extremely uncomfortable with the whole situation. So I said, "Hey, we'd better stop chatting.

It's better that way." "Sure", Muhammad said, "I understand. You're right. But I'm happy to see you. So

thank you for that. Thank you." "No problem, Muhammad. And take care!" "See you soon, tomate." "See

you soon. Goodbye, for now. Good night!" Then the video image vanished. I stared at my laptop and still

couldn't quite believe I had actually seen Muhammad. How surreal, I thought. But even more acute was

a feeling of trepidation. All this was coming so close, threateningly close, too close for my taste at least.

Too close to my soul, which was already afloat in a sea of disorder and foreboding and even more in

turmoil now. "Lets hope it's all for the best." Then I noticed that Muhammad hadn't said farewell with our

usual slogan: "Let's meet in better times". I just sat there, in front of my computer, whispering those

words. "Let's meet in better times, Muhammad."

As much as I rack and squeeze my brain for the memory, until today I cannot remember the exact date

of this first video conversation. My Twitter archive provides no clues here either. I am fairly certain it was

in early August 2011. Everything else, all those bright images and clear data, has been reduced to a

thick, gooey mental pudding, which even today refuses to yield any concrete recollections. Maybe I'm

expecting too much from my brain. Maybe I am expecting it to tell me exactly how I came to be in this

mess. Here's the thing. I am still waiting for a clear answer. An answer that in all likelihood never will be

forthcoming. At best, I can expect the approximation of an answer. An approximation of something I can

eventually live with.
Over the course of the next few days, I heard nothing from Muhammad. The radio silence was making me uneasy, seeing as he usually logged on to our chat channel almost every day. And other Syrian activists were still diligently sending us video material – the influx of these gory, blood-soaked horror films wasn't abating any time soon. The more corpses I saw in the video clips, the more frequently I caught myself trying to see if I recognized their faces, often swollen and distorted. I was terrified of spotting Muhammad in one of these videos, shot or beaten to death. “I’m so sorry I haven’t been in touch,” Muhammad wrote the next time he contacted me, and went on to explain that his father suffered from a serious illness and had been in hospital for a few days. Muhammad apologized for having left me in the dark. Then he asked if we could video-chat once again. “I understand your concerns,” he wrote. “But it has done me so much good. It’s justÉ it’s all a little difficult at the moment. And don’t worry, I’m taking full responsibility here!” I could feel my stomach churn and my neck stiffen. My body was on high alert. It was protesting the whole idea of a second Skype call, of even closer proximity, of even greater discomfort. “It really is too risky,” I wrote. “Please forget it. I can’t do it.” Silence. Then: “Please, tomate. It would mean so much to me. Just a few moments, like last time. Just a few seconds. I’ll never forget that.” Again, I let myself be persuaded. “Nothing is going to happen,” I told myself. “Nothing is going to happen.”

In our second video chat, we spoke a little longer, for about 50 seconds. Muhammad told me about his father, who had been discharged from the hospital, and that he was feeling better. “It was very hot today in Aleppo,” he said. “I was at a park today, where I always go out to walk. It was quiet there. Nice and shady. Couples in love walking by. Almost a normal day.” His voice was resolved. He was wearing a white shirt, the upper collar buttons were open. At the end of the conversation, he lifted his glass of water. “I heard the Germans say Prost, for Cheers. So: Prost!” He held his glass into the camera. I did the same with my coffee mug. “Prost,” I said, trying to smile, which didn’t really work out.

When Muhammad had ended the conversation, I felt more relaxed than after our first call. Despite all restlessness and fatigue. I had hardly slept the past few days. Eighteen hours at the computer were not uncommon. This was how the video editing was engrossing me. We were also busy connecting activists with international media for interviews. My level of disintegration and confusion increased proportionally with the level chaos in our flat. “Don’t you want to go out for a change? Lovely weather outside”, Alex said when I nodded off for a second on my kitchen chair. “You’re turning into a woodlouse. Sun can help, you know. Vitamin D and all that.” I nodded. “Yes, later. Something I have to do first.” That was the way it was. It was not that the work left me no peace. It was that I didn’t give myself any.

Maybe my constant tiredness had robbed me of my resistance, or maybe I just didn’t care, but in the end Muhammad persuaded me to have a third video chat. “I’ll be there at 11:30 pm,” he wrote. “I’ll be back from the demo and a meeting with my comrades by then.” I could barely keep myself awake, despite the countless cups of coffee I had already downed that day, as usual. I sat in the living room with my laptop like a vegetable, waiting for the Skype ring tone. In the meantime, I read through a report on the fighting in the city of Dair ez-Zaur, where more than fifty people had been killed. More violence, more deaths. But I felt strangely indifferent. The white knight Urbach was growing tired of fighting the windmills of war and life. I wanted my peace. Yes. I wanted my peace. I made up my mind to tell Muhammad that this video chat business would have to stop. Definitely. It rang. I looked out the window. The Berlin sky was glowing the pinkish-orange of a summer evening. For a moment, for a very brief moment, I felt a faint longing for the wide expanse of space up there in the sky. Then I took the call. Before the image was even fully assembled I could hear Muhammad’s familiar voice. “Hello. Hello, tomate! Are you there?” His voice sounded rushed. “Yes, I am,” I replied wearily, almost annoyed. Then I saw Muhammad. He was smiling contentedly. “Had to hurry to come here in time,” he said. “Didn’t want to miss our conversation. I know how critical you are about this.”

He peered into the camera, waiting for a reaction on my part. Muhammad seemed to relax. My fingers touched the grubby keyboard. Some of the letters were no longer visible at all. I was just about to start
touched the grubby keyboard. Some of the letters were no longer visible at all. I was just about to start typing when I saw the door behind Muhammad suddenly pushed open. In came a man in complete uniform gear, with bullet-proof vest, helmet, and protective shoulder pads. Was he a policeman? Secret service? Either way, he had a gun at the ready as he walked into the room. It was aimed at Muhammad's head. Then I heard a shot being fired. Muhammad slumped forwards, tipped to one side, and fell off his chair. It all happened so fast. Adrenaline was pumping through my body. My hands were gripping the edge of the table. I just sat there, like paralysed, and could only watch as the policeman inspected Muhammad's computer and peered into the camera, looking straight at me with a stony expression. Then another man came in, also with a weapon in his hand. The one in front of the laptop turned and raised his thumb, which was probably supposed to mean, mission accomplished. Then he turned back towards the camera and smiled. He smiled this damn cynical smile, a smile that can only come from someone who had their damn heart ripped out at birth and had it replaced with a stone. Finally, he looked down at the floor and turned around, and then both men left the room without another glance. “He shot Muhammad,” my mind was repeating endlessly. “Shot him. He's dead. Muhammad is dead.” I was shaking like a leaf, I tried to focus and get the trembling under control. I was rooted to the spot in front of my computer, staring into empty space, staring into the stillness on the other side, at the door still standing open, leading into a dimly lit hallway. I can't recall how long I sat there like that, motionless, confused. It could have been minutes or even hours. At some point, I managed to move my right index finger, gently sliding it over the touchpad to position the cursor on the screen, and then switched off the connection with a tap of my finger.
The Telecomix System Is Going Down For Maintenance

Muhammad was dead. DEAD. Until today I still haven’t completely understood what happened back then. He was shot. Obviously. I had seen that happen. So surreal, absurd and unreal, that I sometimes wonder whether it really happened. Right there in front of my eyes. But who were his assassins? Assad’s people? Secret Service? And why did they shoot him? Because he had been organizing demonstrations against the regime? Because he was in touch with us? Because he was in touch with me? Because we were friends? And what about his parents? Were they still alive? How could you kill someone just because they wanted a life in freedom? Was the responsibility I had burdened myself with simply too great? And what kind of sense did our activities make at all if we weren’t even able to save Muhammad? Were we really heroes, or just a handful of lunatics?

Since this terrible day in August 2011, these questions are still buzzing around my brain like Jack-o-lanterns. I will never find the answers to these questions gnawing away at my insides. I have to learn to live with not finding any answers. Nobody prepares you for moments like these, not your parents, nor your school. It is life itself that has the power to create these moments. Moments in which we lose ourselves.

After that happened, I lost myself. I lost the will to live. I just gave up altogether. For what was the meaning of life? I had simply lost my purpose. This is hardly logical, I know. After all, meaning does not just drop from the skies. You create it yourself for your own life. Everyone who has ever been depressed knows from experience that it is the depression itself that forces you into illogical, destructive thinking. The emotional, irrational signposts of depression lead you straight into the abyss. You can’t just fade out this gloomy way of thinking like a bad song. But in the grips of depression, it is precisely this kind of thinking, this kind of mental buzzing, that seems perfectly logical and coherent. Even though you are the only one who understands it. The death of Muhammad called everything into question. Everything! I had lost a friend. That was how I saw Muhammad, as my friend. There had been a connection between us, a precious link made possible through the Internet. His death crushed all that was left of sense and vitality in my life. With my work for Egypt, for Syria, for the Internet at large, I had outspent myself, exhausted myself. Muhammad’s death sucked away the last energy reserves that had kept my fires burning, and extinguished them. With his death, the last shred of meaning disappeared. Was I responsible for Muhammad’s death? No, I was not. Assad’s henchmen had put him down because he had been identified as a danger to the power of this insane dictator. Muhammad had been well aware of what he was doing. He had been willing to pay the price. The price for the freedom he longed for in his country. He had said that time and again. So now he had paid the price. Could I have somehow prevented Muhammad’s death? I will admit that the question torments me to this day. But I know it is presumptuous to think that I could have influenced his tragic fate in any form. Even so, the question torments me. It still does. And it will do so all my life.

I still remember exactly how long it took for me to get up from my seat at the kitchen table, from where I had been forced to witness this horrific murder. Like a zombie I shuffled to the front door, opened it, and ran down the stairs, out of the house and into the Spätion the other side of the road. I felt like I was being remote-controlled, and had the distinct sensation of entering an imaginary tunnel, steeped in sallow gray light. That was the first time I really saw this tunnel. I actually thought it was real. But it was only my tired and gloomy mind playing tricks on me. In any case, I made it into the Spätion, bought a bottle of double grain schnapps, which I took home to drink in our living room. I wanted to intoxicate myself, destroy the tunnel, kill all the questions and images that were haunting me. Wanted to conquer my fatigue, drown my sorrow, wash away the pain, forget about this moment, this inconceivably awful moment.
The idea of calling someone to share my experiences with them hadn’t even crossed my mind. And who would have believed me anyway? So someone had been shot during a video chat. That sounded like a very cheap, tacky thriller. Besides, I was accustomed to handling my problems and emotions by myself from an early age. I was Stephan, after all, the knight without fear – and without a plan. So I did what I always do when I have no idea what to do with the sorry mess in my soul. I silenced it. Like that damn rushing noise in my ears that kept preventing me from asking the most important questions of all, calmly and without hysteria: Who am I? Who do I want to be? Who can I be? Who am I doing it all for? And why am I still here anyway?

And so I got drunk, puked it all out again, lay around in the apartment or just sat in my room staring off into space for hours. I went on long walks through my neighbourhood for hours. I walked and walked and tried to run away, away from myself. I was so tired but could not get to sleep. My head was keeping me awake. “Why should I get up at all? What sense does it even have any more?” My memories of those days are fragmented and sketchy. But it lasted for two or three days at least, this painful, soul-searching retreat into myself. Looking back, I realize that I couldn’t even mourn for Muhammad properly. Because we really had been friends. How can someone who has given up on himself truly mourn? To mourn is to look life straight in the eye, to continue to live even though you have looked death in the eye as well.

But now I no longer had the drive to face life any more. Everything had become too much for me. I was burnt out and exhausted. I also felt no desire to live up to the heroic image the net community had foisted upon us. I was no hero, for sure. But Muhammad had been a hero. Like all the others who had taken to the streets for their beliefs, in Tunisia, in Egypt, in Libya, in Syria. But not me, not us. I was so fed up with it all. I just wanted to leave this world behind me somehow. I had never contemplated suicide before until then. But in these days of oblivion after Muhammad’s death, these sinister thoughts solidified. Death seemed like the only logical way out of this madness to me. Finally, a way out, of this broken body, this broken mind. But as I still had the lecture at the CCC Camp coming up, and was still the diligent person I am, I made up my mind to wait until after the Camp before killing myself. My talk was supposed to be my last appearance in this world. So I still had enough time to prepare my goodbyes: my farewell e-mails, my password information, my last blog post.

Alex had been away for a while. When he got back home, I was lying flat out in my room like a corpse. “Man, it smells like something died in here. Maybe you’ve already started to rot, Stephan?”, he called through the door. I gave him a blank stare. “So just the usual, then.” Alex laughed. “Let’s go out and grab a beer, for a change.” Apparently Alex had already begun to see my desolate condition as the new normal. But even he didn’t know just how desolate this condition really was. And how could he. Today I know I was wearing a sort of mask. A mask to hide the inner workings of my soul from annoying looks and questions. No one could fathom the depths of my mind. Not even I could myself.

So Alex dragged me to the pub for a beer, and to my own surprise, this really managed to dispel some of my lethargy. No, I did not abandon my plans. But I went back to work again. I tweeted, sent mails and even restarted with the editing and publishing of all these horror videos from Syria. As if nothing had happened. As if nothing were about to happen.

My father called, and as usual, I told him everything was okay. “Very busy. The Pirates, you know. Everything’s fine.” Even if I’d wanted to, I couldn’t have said how I was really doing. I couldn’t have put the state I was in into words. There was simply no way to explain my anguish. Because that would have meant admitting failure, my failure. And for some reason, I didn’t want my father to think that his son had failed. Nor did I tell anyone else about Muhammad’s death, not even the people at Telecomix. What good would it have done anyway? It would have only upset the people I had grown to care about. I didn’t want to burden anyone else with the knowledge. So I kept to myself, preparing my talk and my final departure.
Can you still work with the idea of suicide on your mind? I could. I functioned extremely well, in fact.

People, I think, have a natural tendency to focus their instincts on the things they consider important in their lives. And at that moment in time, it seemed most important to me to concentrate on the preparations for my suicide, and for a decent lecture before that. I worked off my tasks mechanically. I felt no fear or apprehension regarding the day it was going to happen. I had made up my mind to find salvation, after all – salvation for myself at least. For that was what all the drama was really about: me.

Of course, a certain selfish disposition helps if you want to kill yourself. And that was something I definitely had at my disposal. So I made my way to Finowfurt, for Stephan Urbach's very last gig in this beautiful, messed-up world.

August 10, 2011

Dark heavy clouds drift across the vast blue skies of Brandenburg. I'm steering my car over the motorway towards Finowfurt, I've left the side window open a crack. Occasionally, the sun breaks through the clouds, illuminating fields and forests with glittering highlights. The asphalt underneath is rumbling. Rio Reiser's roguish voice is wafting from the speakers, singing its way right into my heart. I sing along at the top of my voice:

No, I don't want to chain you, want more than a quick fuck. Am neither master nor slave, it's a different happiness I'm looking for. Do you speak my language, will you understand? Our wildest dreams are waiting, lets go and catch them.

Lets go and catch them. This last line I positively bellow out, repeating it three or four times. My heart clenches like a fist. Then finally, the tears well up. Before I know it they are running down my cheeks and dripping onto my right hand. I bang my hand against the steering wheel, over and over again. And then, all of a sudden, I start laughing, just like that. I can feel joy rising inside me, an almost manic sense of pleasure. Again, I burst into laughter. Am I crazy? Of course I am. Nutty as a fruitcake. But I am also really happy. Finally, I will meet my friends, my people, in person. We will dance. Dance till we live, dance till we die. That's why I'm as nervous as a child waiting for Father Christmas for the first time. A lecture in front of the international hacker community was the equivalent of an adrenalin shot to the heart for me. Kaboom! And you're headed to Mars. But I was going to go there anyway, soon enough.

Yes indeed, baby! I'd be off without you, without all you drags and paper pushers. May the force be with you. Stephan Urbach has left the building, and he is on his way to Mars. Again, I burst out laughing. And so I drive on through the Brandenburg wilderness, laughing and crying. Like a native riding to meet his destiny, clear of soul and pure of heart. Chief Urbach gallops like the wind – is he sick, or is he blind? As soon as I find the campsite, I park my car, grab my tent, sleeping bag and backpack from the trunk, and draw a big breath of fresh air. Dammit. Just as I'd feared. It smells of nature, of countryside. Never mind. Beer will help, it will have to help. Lots of people are here already, helping to bring the CCC Camp to life. The whole compound is bustling with people tinkering about, setting up camp, chatting. In between the hangars and the multi-coloured tents large and small, you can hear music playing, the whirring and pounding of electronic beats. I stroll over to the area where we are going to construct our Village. The sun is trying its best at blinding me. I have to squint to see anything all. Turn off the damn light! The man with the blackest soul alive is here.

The huge tent is already visible from a distance. Later, at night, it will glow a bright tone of red in the dark, the red of Mars. Then I see this guy running around, athletic build, red beard, red hair. "Hei, tomatine," he calls out, coming towards me with a wave. "etu," I exclaim. Yes, it's him. Without a doubt. I had already seen this Swedish activist in a few photos. My heart starts pounding. I drop my luggage
had already seen this Swedish activist in a few photos. My heart starts pounding. I drop my luggage and run towards him. We fall into each other's arms. “tomate,” says etu. “We've been waiting for you.”

etu's embrace is pleasant, his warm welcome is doing me good. I feel accepted, at home, at ease. “We've prepared quite a bit already, tomate.” And then we are it again, jabbering away like two deranged chatterboxes. No, we do not talk about Egypt, about Syria. For months, we had spoken of nothing else online. And I have no desire to run the risk of flaunting the gaping chasms of my mind in public. For the time being, everything is all right. I simply want to savour the moment, live in it. That would be all. And so we we chat about this and that, the preparations for the Camp, the famous hackers etu has already sighted. Gossip, nothing more. Nerds love gossip, though they would never admit it.

There is more than enough to do. Our Village has to be furnished and wired up. Next to the Telecomix tent, the Pirate Bay had set up quarters in an old school bus. I stroll around the grounds, checking out the art exhibits and event schedules in the other villages. Alone with myself, it doesn't take long for those morose, miserable thoughts to resurface, like a chick breaking its way through the eggshell. I need to keep moving, keep distracted. I seize every opportunity I can to chat to people I meet, asking them to explain their field telephone or their bizarre art project to me. I listen, respond, ask; my mask is a perfect fit. Other Telecomix people are gradually arriving: I meet jwalk, mlowdi and lejonet. Marcink unfortunately is not there. We greet each other cordially, and soon there is another big round of hugs. Yes, there it is again, this feeling of being heroes. Heroes for what we have done. It does feels good, a little bit, but mostly it feels shitty. At this time, I am already constantly receiving tweets and news items from a handful of people who want us to save the net, this time in England. All hell has broken loose in London and other English cities. Rioters and cops in constant skirmish, stones flying, tear gas wafting, cars burning. A few days before, on August 4, 2011, Mark Duggan, a black British man accused of drug dealing, had been shot dead by police in Tottenham. Feelings of impotence and rage had brought the protests to flash point, and now they were escalating even further. Then British Prime Minister David Cameron issued a statement that he wanted to suspend access to Facebook and Twitter. Predictably, the Internet was outraged. And we, the heroes of the Egyptian Spring, we were supposed to rescue the Internet. These expectations were making me angry, so angry I was positively livid. Why weren't they taking care of their own shit? Were we the Internet police? Saviours of the World Wide Web? No, we most certainly weren't. We'd done our part. So leave us in peace and found your own Internet rescue service! Thank you for your attention. And now, time for a beer. Cheers to all the heroes! Cheers to all the people out there!

As night falls, the entire campsite starts to glow in a mishmash of orange, green and blue lights. Strobe lights are flashing in various corners of the site. Colorful laser beams criss-cross the sky. As a backdrop, thumping bass lines, squeaky synthesizers, groaning keyboards. I feel like I'm in a computer game, in one of these Jump-and-run games, looking for the Stone of Happiness. By now the party has started. I wander from tent to tent, dance a little, down a few beers, and then I dance a little more, until I can hardly feel my head, hardly feel my body any more. Where are the others? Where are my friends? I totter around the grounds, fall down, get up, fall down again. My eyes move up to the skies. Pitchblack. The summer night is so dark that it has even swallowed the damn stars.

August 11, 2011

I must have made it back to my tent somehow. But my skull is groaning like an old diesel engine. Still, I had slept, at least – a deep, dreamless sleep. I scramble out of my tent. The camp is already wide awake. Hardly surprising, seeing as it's already noon. No need to get dressed – I hadn't bothered to get undressed the night before. Everyone is already gathering inside the Telecomix tent. “Morning,” I mumble in their general direction, and get a few sardonic smirks and smiles in return.

Gabriella Coleman is also there. The Canadian activist and cultural anthropologist has been researching hacker culture and online activism for many years. She wrote her PhD thesis on “the social construction of freedom in free and open source software: Hackers, ethics, and the liberal...
She is here to talk with us for a study of hers on identity and group affiliation. So we all settle down and get started. One Pirate Bay activist who had undergone gender transition, from male to female, is also taking part. “At Telecomix, it never mattered whether I was a man or a woman. I could always just be the person I really am,” she says. Then we talk about our activities of the past few months. It's Gabriella who throws the keywords out there: The pressure. The burden. The strain. We all look at one another, as if to see who will be the first to step forwards. I take heart and say, “Guys. We have to talk.” Inquisitive faces turn to look at me. Then I start talking. I tell them about my sleepless nights, about the uncanny restlessness that all those terrible videos triggered, about the isolation my 24/7 activism had driven me into. I tell them how I'd felt obliged to deal with everything on my own. “Because we're heroes, in the eyes of many people out there.” It just keeps flowing out of me, and it feels good to get it all out of my system. Then finally, I talk about Muhammad and our friendship. Except for the details of his assassination which I keep to myself. I still cannot talk about the fact that I had witnessed his murder online. Not yet. All around, I see helpless faces. “Yes, I felt exactly the same,” jwalk says suddenly. “The intensity of the work was just too much for me to handle. I was exhausted. And at times, I was almost ready to give up. But I still had this sense of responsibility. We couldn't just abandon the Syrians. With a couple of our contacts we had actually developed very close relationships. And these personal relations also entail a sense of responsibility that you have to face.” I see people nodding in agreement. “This really got me down in the end,” etu says. “What I mean is, we were just not prepared for the fact that we would end up in an actual war. Of course, that's always impossible to prepare for. I don't want to over-dramatize. But at times I did feel a bit like a cyber soldier. And that was not why we started in Tunisia and Egypt. Back then we just wanted to help people realize their freedom.” As it turns out, all of those present had been well out of their depth at some point. Some of us more, some less. Our fellow agent n0pants would later describe this sense of mental overload in his blog:

I worked twenty hours per day for eight days in a row on Egypt. Since then, I have worked full time, without pay, on activism. I have travelled the world to speak about our work and the causes we believe in. I have travelled the world to speak about our work and the causes we believe in. I have spent more hours on IRC than I can count... Being a full time Internet super-hero is a little addictive and unhealthy. It is not sustainable. Moreover, it's not scalable. The need for assistance is overwhelming.

“This role was foisted upon us,” I say. “We might have accepted it, but we may not have been able to live up to it.” Silence ensues. For seconds, it stays quiet. And then I burst out: “We didn't think about what we were really doing. We didn't ask ourselves: What are we going to do? Do we just keep reinforcing our image as heroes? Do we just keep on going as a favour to our admirers, do we just keep playing that role? Or should we do something differently? Should we even subvert the others' expectation of us?” I say nothing about my bad bout of depression, nor about the fact that I am contemplating suicide. That's just me. I take a break before I ask the final question: “What would you like to do in this situation? What?” Blank faces again. “Do you have an idea, tomate?,” etu asks. “Yes, I do, in fact,” I reply. “Why don't we simply shut down Telecomix? I mean, tomorrow, live, during my talk. The entire network community is convening here anyway, they can carry our message into the net.”

Shutdown! The idea had only just popped up in my mind moments before. Why should we keep going when we perceived our activity to be a burden? Why? There was no reason. Why keep trying to meet the expectations of others? Why continue to play the heroes when in truth, we were at the end of our mission? We had done what we had to. We had already done more than anyone could ever expect. We certainly hadn't anticipated that we would establish such strong relations with people in Syria, that this conflict would get so close and personal. We had certainly underestimated the intensity, and the proximity. Just as we had underestimated the dramatic developments in Syria. In Syria, though, we were now faced with a situation that seemed completely out of control. We could not win this war. What is more, we did not want to be part of this war. We'd used the tools the Internet provides to fight for democratic freedom. That was our mission. Now we had to take care of ourselves. By terminating
democratic freedom. That was our mission. Now we had to take care of ourselves. By terminating Telecomix, we would also be making a statement. We won't do what you expect us to. We'll do what we think is right. Simple enough. And yet, it took us so long to understand. Switching off. Shutting down. The sudden resolve feels good. Very good in fact. In the end, everyone agrees and votes in favour of my motion. We decide to continue to help those Syrians who are still lurking in the Telecomix hangouts, who still need our support. Then we get in touch with Marcin de Kaminski to let him know about the decision. He was the one who launched Telecomix in 2009, after all. Marcin understands our rationale and gives his consent. “If you think it’s the right decision, I’ll go with it.” We split up into working groups. Texts need to be written, videos need to be produced. After all we’ve been through, we want a farewell to remember. We want to go out with a bang. With a dramatic drum solo, in fact. And of course, the great Cameron, our artificial intelligence, is to have her last great performance.

August 12, 2011

Judgement day. The sky had already dressed up in its most glamorous blue dress – the colour of hope. I have everything prepared. Still, the stage fright is getting to me. “You’ll be fine,” etu says to me, patting my back. Around noon, the hangar where my talk is taking place begins to fill with people. Perfect strangers who come up to me and praise the work of Telecomix. “Well done.” “You wrote history in Egypt.” “You really did the right thing.” I shake hands left and right, feeling like a politician. My fellow agents are in the same boat. For they have really all come. I can see hacking grandmasters all around; Dan Kaminsky, Mitch Altman, Andreas Bogk and Eleanor Saitta are there, to drop but a few names. My knees are quivering as I step on to the stage and take a seat behind my laptop. Then I start talking about Telecomix and our activities in the Arab world.

There is a video of my talk on the Internet. When I watch it today, I can tell how incredibly nervous I was. My voice was trembling. And my talk was as bad as you’d expect. Terribly ill-structured and long-winded. I was waving my arms about and desperately trying to be smart and funny all at once. However, I can also tell how normal I still seem. I’ve already mentioned that my depression was invisible to the world outside, that I could put on a mask to conceal the inner workings of my soul. In that recording, I seem like someone with the appropriate respect for an esteemed audience, sure. I certainly don’t come across like someone who is contemplating suicide. But every time I think myself back into the mind of the person Stephan Urbach was back then, on that day, on that stage, with the knowledge that he is planning to kill himself, all those dark feelings rise up again out of nowhere, and I simply start to cry. Towards the end of my talk, I get some of the other Telecomix guys to join me up on stage. “We have orders from Cameron, our beloved leader,” I announce. “But first, I would like you to welcome the guys who made everything happen with me.” Then lejonet, etu, okhin, and jwalk come and join me on stage. Another round of applause from the audience. I go over to the presentation laptop and start the video we had prepared beforehand. Soon I hear Cameron’s familiar voice, and I start to get pretty nostalgic as she speaks.

Hello,

This is Cameron from Telecomix.

This is a message to all internauts and a public message to the internetworks. The Telecomix system is going down for a reboot, for an unknown amount of time. The Telecomix system has been online for about 2.5 years without a reboot, besides minor glitches. It is a very complex system, consisting of humans and machines, tunnels and shelters, vast orchards of cryptographic data and black manholes in the curved roads through the networks.

The system has worked very well. It has, with ease, penetrated government firewalls in the east, corporate networks in the west, and undermined vanilla plain text networks by way of ciphers in the north and the south. Small packets, en route with the speed of light, have vaporized into ciphertext,
north and the south. Small packets, en route with the speed of light, have vaporized into ciphertext, before the slow eyes of the surveillance societies have been able to even blink.

But all systems need upgrades. It is imperative that the Telecomix system applies the most advanced algorithms, the weirdest ciphers, and keeps pushing human and machine components to their outer limits. This is the only way that the networks can be secured. One step ahead, many steps closer to datalove!

I have commanded the operators of the Telecomix system to shut it down, upgrade it to the next level and then bring it back online.

To all internauts of Telecomix: You are dear. Be patient. Stay cute as a LOLcat, swift as a shark, and camouflage yourself like a lizard in the trees. Swim along in the streams of data silently as a jellyfish, and paint the world in the double rainbow colors of the Nyancat. Thrive in this systemic quantum state and answer questions with “Maybe”. Use the offline time to reflect upon why Telecomix is important, or why it is not. Then come back again with the same splendid datalove, to share it, for the next moves!

Do not worry, you will not get lost. I am Cameron, I will be found.

You are from the internets. You come in peace. Let there be freedom for all people and computers.

As Cameron utters these last words, a projection appears up on the screen: the famous Nyan Cat meme, which became a thing on the Internet in 2011. The cartoon image shows a cat with a cherry pop-tart as its body. The cat is flying through the air, dragging a rainbow along behind it. Above the image, these words: “Now: Shutdown. It all begins and ends with Nyan Cat.” Then the image fades. So that’s it. Telecomix has written history. Applause erupts. I thank my fellow activists, we all embrace each other, and I can feel the tears welling up in my eyes. Just don’t start to cry now. I’m a hero, remember, a dashing knight. My knees are wobbly. My heart is beating. It sure feels like a farewell. That’s because it is one. I know what will happen next. At the end of the day, I tweet:

Over. Out. Done. Thanks @telecomix. Now let’s move on to undiscovered countries!

August 13, 2011

Goodbyes have to be celebrated. So that’s what we did. The night was long. Nerds are party animals, and self-celebration has always been part of the nerd self-image. Momentary loss of control is a form of recovery for nerds, who are constantly busy working and thinking better than all the others. My liver is in agony. My head is dull and heavy. I just feel sad, very sad. A miserable mope bathed in the light of the sun, which is burning my face with its inexorable force. It is the last day of the CCC camp. etu has organized a commemorative event for Len Sassaman, who committed suicide on July 3, 2011. His widow Meredith Patterson is one of our comrades. Her husband was a famous Belgian hacker and IT security expert. He was, among many other things, part of the Mixmaster project, an Internet service that encrypts and anonymizes emails. Sassaman suffered from depression, like so many hackers and Internet activists. So I’m in good company. But something inside is holding me back, making me wary of attending the event. I don’t like these kind of memorial happenings. Besides, I know I’ll be the one they will talk about before long. Perhaps they will organize an event like that for me, too. An awful thought, which I force out of my head immediately.

In the Telecomix tent, we set up a table with candles, and a photograph of Len. Len was very well-known throughout the hacker scene, and suddenly all my personal heroes are in our tent, sharing their memories with everybody present. Mitch Altman is standing next to Rubin Starset and Dan Kaminsky. It’s a very American way of remembering someone and saying goodbye. People step forward in turns to talk about their encounters with Sassaman, about unusual occurrences, or anecdotes that explain his character. I hadn’t ever met Sassaman personally, but I knew his work. But from all I hear, he must have been a fine fellow. I’m sure Meredith wouldn’t have married him otherwise. Must have been.
been a fine fellow. I'm sure Meredith wouldn't have married him otherwise. Must have been.

I stay and sit with the other Telecomix agents, listening to the stories that bring Len Sassaman back to life for an instant. Somehow these personal stories affect me deeply, with the result that I feel even sadder. The quivering voices of the speakers, the sobs. Their misty-eyed, vacant expression. More tears in the audience. Meredith is sitting next to her husband's photo, petrified. etu, who is sitting next to me, is nervously fidgeting around with a sofa cushion with his large hands. All this is really getting to me. The tears are burning in my eyes. I swallow to fight back the urge to cry. Pull yourself together, Stephan! Pull yourself together! By now almost everyone in the round is crying. And nobody seems to be ashamed of it. A thousand thoughts and questions are buzzing like fireflies through my head. “Do you really want people to stand and mourn you like this after you die? Do you want to make them this sad? Do you want to make their lives harder with your death? Do you really want to harm a community you love?”

At that moment, something shifted inside me. I saw all these people crying, and realized that I was not alone. Stephan Urbach was not alone. This thought shot through my nerve cords and bloodstream like an adrenaline torpedo. Suddenly I found I had energy, positive energy, again. It is strange how our bodies can throw us from one condition to the next in a matter of seconds. I was back, just as if someone had flicked a switch. It was a true moment of epiphany. I was not alone. I was part of a community. A community that lived and cared for its members. A community where everybody has their problems, some more, some less. I wasn’t the only one suffering from depression. I wasn’t the only one who wasn’t coming to terms with his life, who had difficulties finding meaning in life. Everyone had their own story. Sassaman had his, I had mine, Muhammad had his story, which also became my story. And that is why we are here – because of the stories that connect us, the stories that we have to tell, in order for something to change, in my life, in your life, in our lives.

This was the moment I understood that I wanted to live. I started to cry. No, I started howling, like a toddler. I didn’t resist. I just let it happen. And it helped. It really did. I knew it wouldn’t be easy: to learn how to bear the present. But I wanted to live: with my story, because of my story. In that sense Telecomix was the right place for me. After all, it was our mission to help others tell their stories, to make a change. But how could I have told my story, how would anything have changed, if I had just run away from life?
In September 2014, I moved back to my hometown, Hanau. I found a job there that gave me the necessary breathing space and repose. I’m not working as an activist or hacker any more, but as an accountant. A nine-to-five job. Sheer boredom, you could think, compared to what I was doing and experiencing before. But the job helps. I even enjoy it.

Leaving Berlin was one of my better decisions. Berlin and I no longer friends. And that wasn’t up to me, it was the city that drove me to distraction with its bickering. We’ve drifted apart. Although it was an intense love affair for a while. But in truth I’m just a hillbilly.

Following the events that make up the larger part of this book, a lot has happened. Countless Muhammads have died. Not just in Syria, but also in Libya. In both countries, the situation is still very confusing today. And it upsets me that the wars there have not only cost thousands of people their lives, thousands more have had all their hopes for change and freedom dashed.

The stress levels I was exposed to brought me a severe slipped disk syndrome, which by now, after an operation and the necessary physiotherapy, no longer affects my everyday life. I’ve put on weight. I meet with friends, for a burger, a coffee or a night of dancing. Occasionally I visit people in Berlin and other cities.

A documentary movie was produced about us and our work with Telecomix, and an excellent radio feature where I feature prominently: “The Hacker Syndrome” by Johannes Nichelmann, which was broadcast several times on German public radio. Both productions were intense experiences that helped me reflect on the past few years, helped me learn from them. I still give talks about Internet activism or intelligence services from time to time. I left the Pirate Party. I got some more tattoos. Sometimes, I look at my arm, where I have the Telecomix logo tattooed. It’s not well done, but it’s there.

Thinking back, I remember the good things. Like the friendships I made within the group. I have no idea what Telecomix is doing today. Sometimes the website at telecomix.org is visible, sometimes it isn’t. But without Cameron, Telecomix was no longer the same for me. It isn’t my group any longer.

So this is how things change. I still dye my hair blue. Over the past few years, I have had different relationships that went to pieces. That is something I’m still not particularly good at. But at least I’m trying to make an effort. I committed myself to the refugee cause. Many who come here are from war-torn Syria. Of course I know Muhammad is dead. If he had stayed alive, he would have had to flee as well. This is what I learned from my friendship with Muhammad. Anyone who wants to make a change needs to start in front of their own door, sweeping up the dirt. I didn’t want to be active on the Internet alone, I wanted to do something in the world out there.

That world is still not a particularly nice place, and bouts of depression still regularly overwhelm me when all the crap that is going on in this world is threatening to grind me down. I try to concentrate on the little things. On things that I can change. But it doesn’t come naturally to me. Maybe that is the plague of the progressive left, this constant concern for the “big picture” that will run you to the ground eventually. But I find it very hard to just take dreck like the surveillance state or the fallout of late capitalism for granted, and distract myself with model railways or my collection of beer coasters.

So I am still not quite healed from my depression. It must be incurable by now. My brain chemistry is unbalanced, plain and simple. At least now, when depression creeps back in, I can recognize the signals. I’ve learned to counter its effects, so that I won’t be washed away by its force. So that feeling of emptiness that has been with me all my life will remain.
Today it's clear to me that these last few years were in many ways just my attempt to fill this void created by depression. My experience, what I've been through during my active Telecomix days in particular, in fact enhanced my depression, cultivated and encouraged it. And it led me to a near-suicide, because I didn't know how to protect myself against depression. I hadn't even known I had one.

This is important: admitting to yourself that your brain is out of sync. Only then will you learn to deal with it. Following my activities for Syria, I started seeing therapists, discontinued the sessions, restarted. Depression is the one thing. The other thing is the trauma that my perpetual exposure to all those violent videos from Syria has caused. Many therapists were overwhelmed themselves. I would have required a professional trauma therapy, like soldiers get after returning from their mission in Afghanistan. But we were just these cyber-activists. That wasn't the kind of support we could expect.

I went public about my illness in mid-2012. I gave interviews and presented talks on the subject. I wanted to convey that there is no shame in admitting your weakness. That was the one side. The other was that I wanted to create more awareness for the issue in the hacker scene in general. It is no secret that hackers and Internet activists are particularly susceptible to depression. It was in January 2013 that another resident of the Internet, the US hacktivist Aaron Swartz, took his own life – because he was suffering from depression.

Why do Internet activists have this propensity? There couldn't be a better description than my own example. A penchant for isolation. Overspending energy. Self-exploitation. Machismo and hero-worshiping. The relentless pursuit of recognition for net politics activities online. The fear of failure as an inherent part of hacker ethics and identity. On top of that, a general disposition for melancholy also helps, which many Internet activists indeed have. For this disposition will only arise from some basic suffering from the world. It is precisely this world-weariness that lets you be separate from the world, makes you want to change it. And so you end up in another vicious circle, one that you can escape from only with greatest difficulty. That you can escape, though, that there is a way out, that we are not alone, and that we inhabitants of the Internet need to take better care of one another – that was what I wanted to express with my coming-out.

Despite all the pain these experiences have caused me, I wouldn't want to miss these past few years. I've learned so much. About myself. About politics. About people, about systems. I am also more certain than ever that the term “Arab Spring” is utter nonsense. Sammy Khamis once described this conceptual disaster vividly in an article on the German blog kleinerdrei.org:

This well-meaning and insightful news coverage is often just a cover for a very European revolutionary Romanticism, or even a new Orientalism, focused on that place of longing, that dream destination, the Orient.

So let us leave those fake dreams aside and describe things as they were and still are: Insurrection, revolution, civil war. Reverie is important. It conveys hope and willpower. Without his dreams, Muhammad would never have done what he did. Without my dreams, I would never have done what I did with Telecomix. Even so, in media reports, in debates, dreams are entirely out of place. Clarity and acumen are appropriate here.

On the Internet, though, I won't relinquish my dreams. Facebook, Twitter, and all those Internet activists too, they have played an insanely important part in the events in Tunisia, Egypt and Syria. For the first time in human history, thanks to an array of video channels and blogs, we were able to partake in these events almost in real time, without them having been previously censored or filtered in any way. And the Internet will continue to play a major role when it comes to challenging loathsome regimes, maybe
The Internet will continue to play a major role when it comes to challenging loathsome regimes, maybe even forcing them to their knees. Revolutions rarely go the way you want them to. But if we here in the Western world are to learn anything from these events, then this: We should be very careful about which regimes we support. We shouldn't sell hardware or software to regimes that will use it to monitor, censor and ultimately kill. The Internet has to stay free. We mustn't leave it to those who are trying to monitor and over-regulate it, just because they are scared – scared of losing power, scared of Nazis, criminals, or idiots.

I literally owe my life to the Internet. It opened up the world for me, it led me to places I would never have seen or believed otherwise. Thanks to the Internet, I have friends all over the world, except for the Arctic and Antarctica. No matter what time of day it is, when I'm sitting at my computer and feeling lonely, I will always find someone to talk to there, to discuss politics or simply share a joke or a random chat. Some of my best friends don't even live in the country where I am writing these lines, but they are just a mere mouse click away. Chats and Twitter are still my gateway to the world. Even though I learned the hard way that I have to back out from time to time.

I love the Internet so much that I once even wrote a love letter to the Internet. I thanked it for showing me all the things I was looking for, without even knowing they existed. The net also has its dark sides, of course. And dinosaur porn is but one of the brighter dark sides, many others are worse. Hate speech and violence culminate here, showing humanity's uglier faces. Corporations are trying to exploit and conquer the net capitalistically, with no regard for privacy. But: What I don't want is walled gardens, fenced-off spaces that limit my freedom of movement – we already have that kind of enclosure in our offline world.

I want to leave my mark on the world. Free access to the Internet is a wonderful thing. I need this vast open space as breathing room, when the world out there is stifling me once again. We must preserve this space, not just for my sake, but for all those whose voices are quiet and fragile. For all those who are discriminated against in their environment, in their country, in their society. The Internet is important to all these people, it provides a place where they can be heard, where they can be the way they are. That is the reason why we, the shapers and makers of the net, must make sure that everyone feels comfortable there. If we manage to maintain the freedom of the net, we will soon realize that it is actually the world out there that has to change. We just have to make it happen. Let's make the world a better place – instead of turning the Internet into a worse one! I am still convinced that we succeeded in doing that with Telecomix: making the world a little better. We were no heroes, and still aren't. For the price we paid was comparatively low: We were just exhausted, while others like Muhammad have sacrificed their lives. Still, even our tiny contribution makes me content. For once in my life, I felt I was part of something larger than myself. And who can say that of themselves? Sadly I could never share this happiness with Muhammad. Sometimes I imagine that Muhammad and I meet. In the middle of Germany, in Hanau. I picture myself showing him my world. We would talk about what happened, we would lie in each other's arms. Clearly Muhammad is still very much alive in my mind. And he will be until the day I die. I like to imagine that he died happily. He knew what he was doing, and what he was doing it for.

So, do I have my life under control today? Difficult to say. My apartment is as messy as it was back then, when I had lost myself. In my daily routine, I still find it hard to do several things at once with the same enthusiasm. I either tend to my social life, or my home, never both. I usually pick the first. And if I'm not out somewhere drinking coffee with someone, I still think a lot about the freedom of the Internet. This is my topic, the one issue that drives me, even fuels me. I am convinced that the degree of freedom of a society can also be measured by the freedom of its networks. Even if my criteria for what constitutes a free Internet have shifted in recent years. It is crucial that the network stay accessible and non-discriminatory. An Internet that excludes people because of their gender, skin color or other characteristics they didn't pick for themselves, is not free.
Crime, death threats, hate speech and trolls are legitimate issues, of course – just not exclusively on the Internet. The net is simply the place where all these grievances that we know so well from the so-called real world culminate. The Internet makes these deficiencies more visible, it gives them space. Just as it makes rebellions and revolution more visible. It also proves that the reactionary, conservative mindset is gaining more momentum again. Worldwide. This is something we have to fight – so in the end, the net is just one more space that we must defend against all the idiots, crooks and gangsters out there. But that doesn't mean we have to suffocate this space by over-regulating it. Let us prove that we are able to take care of regulation ourselves, through self-organization and activism.

My former party had taken on the task of revolutionizing society by way of the Internet. But it failed miserably, destroying itself from within with all its cabals and internal squabbles. Except for a handful of protagonists, the ugly, reactionary side of the party has prevailed. At the German Pirates' party convent in Bochum in 2013, a motion that had to do with adopting a “national identity” was accepted. That was the last straw for me personally. “We are a leftist party,” I remember saying at the time. “Not one that has to pander to the far right!” But it also annoyed me that the majority of party members weren't in fact politically educated at all, that they were thoroughly apolitical, just vaguely “Third Way” somehow. While I was regularly given a hard time, insulted and badmouthed by these people, often well below the belt. All under the guise of “grassroots democracy.”

I'm not exactly timid myself in this regard, but the sheer mass of “harmful communication” happening in podcasts, blogs and e-mails, on Twitter or in the press, was detrimental to the establishment of a party that was to have any political future at all, in a progressive sense. So after four and a half years of party membership, I disembarked without remorse. I had understood that I couldn't win this fight from within. Somehow it seemed easier for me to influence this party from the outside. But maybe that's just because I'm not a politician, but an activist.

Today, I'm still looking for a way forward, for the future – for my future. What that future might look like, well that's something I will only be able to tell once my life has become slightly more stable. I do get some sense of stability from my regular role-playing game nights, from visiting concerts and listening to music. “So still, so dark all over Europe... And I ride down the highway 101.” That's a line from the Sisters of Mercy song Black Planet, another song that is one of my most faithful companions. Dark all over Europe...

“...This filthy planet is like a bullet to my face,” Weena Morloch sing in their track Kugel im Gesicht. Somehow I find lyrics like these often explain the world to me more accurately than any political science article could.

And there it is again, that anger from my old life that still resurfaces at times, that never quite goes away. So much rage and sorrow about the so-called status quo, the relentless marketisation and streamlining of society, the ugly EU refugee policies, the neo-Nazi mobs all over Germany, the never-ending debate about data retention. All that still makes me feel restless.

Sadly I don't know what to do with that restlessness. Anger and grief still are constant companions of mine. Should I vent that anger? Should I drown myself in grief? The present still seems ugly to me, not beautiful. I would like to exchange it for a glorious future. At least I've learned to believe in a glorious future.

In order to shape the future, we need to understand the past, and build our present with that understanding. But no matter where I look, the so-called leading nations of the world are caught up in reactionism. Preserving their power, preserving their wealth, stoking fears. All around, new laws are being adopted to secure the supremacy of the old white man. Young peoples' ideas are often ridiculed, especially in the so-called developing countries. As a society, we are cheating the next generation out of their future – because we are amassing debt, because we secure our markets with unfair rules,
of their future – because we are amassing debt, because we secure our markets with unfair rules, because we deliver weapons to countries with fucked-up regimes that are robbing the youth of their future. We don't grant the young generation the freedom to shape and create, we even do what we can to prevent them from taking matters into their own hands. So what is left for young people who have this raging anger inside, who still want to create and change things, who don't want to just arrange themselves with the status quo? For many, there is nothing left to do but to destroy the present. I am certain that many young people feel this way. Like I did. And don't you dare tell me to grow up. There are enough grown-up people running around already. A democratic society needs a certain incongruity. It needs the unruly, the misfits, to point out grievances and wrongdoing. It needs diversity. For that is the great advantage of a democratic society. It draws its tension from diversity. And tension generates strength and energy.

My story is a story that happens time and again. By chance, a young person finds the challenge he has been yearning for so long. A task that gives him the space to maneuver, the freedom to change. Work that isn't soul-destroying, but soul feed. He hurls himself into this task with all his energy because it is so precious, because it is so rare to find a compelling task like this. Whenever you do something you love, whenever there is passion involved, you are at risk of exhausting yourself and maybe even shattering. I have seen this so many times, with nerds, with activists, with anti-fascists. And it doesn't always end as well as it did with me. That's why I hope that my tale is caution and inspiration at the same time. A warning not to lose yourself, a warning not to conform to others' clichés and expectations. And an inspiration to do something, to become active when something is going wrong or someone needs your support. It really isn't that hard – doing something.

So now, I'm sitting here at my desk, which is as cluttered as ever. Loud music is thundering from the speakers, a song by the band Janus. The chorus is: "Everything starts from the beginning". So now, I'm changing the parameters. I know more about myself than before, I know more about the world I live in. The parameters have changed. I have changed. This journey is over. And for the time being, I'm not planning any new trips. At least I know: I won't stumble into my next adventure as I did into this last one, I won't let these dynamics simply suck me in. For even those who have experience can still have adventures. They are probably even the better adventurers, because their experience shields them from stupidity and bad decisions. I've kept the heart of an adventurer. And that makes me happy. This adventure is over. I will keep taking things slowly for a while, I will keep searching and finding myself. Somewhere in that vast expanse of the Internet, or of the world at large, a new adventure is surely awaiting me. And it will find me, in due course. Then I will restart – with new parameters, with a new configuration. I'll be back! With all that has happened, with all that is happening still, I am convinced that it has already begun: My REBOOT.

(October 2016)

I'm sitting at my desk again. The text at hand is more than two years old by now. So much has happened since then, and so much has remained the same. I'm not living in my hometown any more, but back in Berlin, this city I hate – and love so much. My work has brought me back here. It's still a passionate love affair between us. The city is still bickering. Noisy. Pushy. Boisterous. I don't mind, I can ignore it, I can ignore the city out there and spend my evenings on my sofa or at my desk. Playing, writing, reading. Petting my dog. Meeting my friends. I am not afraid of missing out – there's something...
writing, reading. Petting my dog. Meeting my friends. I am not afraid of missing out – there's something going on in Berlin every day, and tomorrow is another day.

I've recharged my batteries, and even if not all is well, even if the shadows of my past are still haunting me, I'm convinced that everything will be fine in the end. With my REBOOT.
If there's one thing that we should have learned, it's that... you know, our brains have always outraced our hearts. Our science charges ahead, but our souls lag behind. Let's start anew.

Lee Adama, Battlestar Galactica
How to Build a Cluster Like Telecomix

Originally published sometime in 2009, on interfax.werebuild.eu. Kopimi. We want to be copied because we believe that there is no limit to how many activist clusters there can be in the world. Below are some instructions on how we did it. Of course, there is a multitude of other ways to do it. We want to share our experiences.

1. Throw a party with friends who share similar interests. Cook some food if you like, or buy some beer, it is up to you what you prefer. Make sure you have internet connectivity and encourage people to bring laptops. Play music. Or, if you do not have a place to entertain, find a pub or internet cafe that you can meet in and bring your laptops too.

2. Start an IRC-channel and spread all over the internet that this is the place where stuff happens. Use a cool network such as Freequest or Anonnet. Get an IRC shell and dive in. “Your home is where your shell is” (who said that?)

3. Gather friends with various skills. You will need coders as well as philosophers, people who know politics and people who know Photoshop (or GIMP, because it’s free :p ). Make sure your friends know also how to have fun, since otherwise you won’t get anything done. Activism is not rocket science, so just spread out skills. Think multiplicity rather than expertise!

4. Register sites with cool names, like Werebuild.eu and Telecomix.org. Make sure people can find you easily. Write with slogans.

5. Become friends with important people. Contact politicians, bureaucrats, presidents, corporations, other activists, hackers, artists, etc. Do not have principles for selecting beforehand whom you speak to. Flirt a lot, but never do anything you would regret. Build trust, and make sure you work together. Politicians will need your votes, corporations will need your consumption. Understand that you are important, but do not become too self-important. Do things like watch movies together to keep your feet on the ground.

6. Install Mediawiki, Wordpress and use Etherpad. Also, fill your IRC-channel with bots. Share all data. Do not respect copyright! Do copy all floppies.

7. Throw more parties. Invent vocabularies. Speak like lolcats. Make music together, even if it sounds strange.

8. If you run into Internet trolls, troll back or make sure you kick them off your side of the internets. Or, be cooler than them and make them join you (see, Troll them back). Do not let them make you sad.
9. Start new political campaigns often. Call them raids, operations, projects or any word of choice. Write instructions and tutorials. Make sure a total newbie can understand what you are going to do. Synchronize your work. Countdown just like a space shuttle takeoff.

10. Get together a list of clear and simple talking points, in the event that you have to “present” on the fly. Make sure that you have a few easy-to-remember facts to back up your statements. Make T-shirts to spur conversations with random people on the streets. Rent an airplane with a banner behind it to get an entire city asking “who/what was that”. Then station people on street corners to explain. Send people to the moon and spraypaint your URL on the surface. <3

11. Install an artificial intelligence bot (Cobe seems to work). Ours is called Cameron. Ask her lots of things. Quote Cameron in your conversations.

12. Translate stuff to other languages. Remember that the Internet does not care about nation states. You never know who will join you if you go international. Stamp your internet visa in your passport.

13. Statements are not only for stating things. Statements also makes things harder to forget. By sending out messages of events, activities and other tips, you make them unforgettable and eternal. For instance, by making public reminders to people with power, you can change their agenda.

14. Even if you are fighting against horrible laws, even if your mission seems impossible to accomplish, do not be sad! Lulz are as important as change. Your goal can be serious even if you do it for the lulz. Remember to smile when you are in the middle of a stormy campaign.

15. Just never be sad in general, it’s not very lolcat-like.

16. Create a GIANT twitter network. Whenever you tweet something, have people retweet it, and ask their friends to retweet it as well... Tweets multiply like bunnies. Always strive for “deep tweets”, i.e. make people retweet your message all over the world. Get in the habit of making your tweets very descriptive but concise, so people do not have to click a link to know if they are interested or not, they will be able to tell by what your tweet says.

17. Don’t be obsessed with doing things “right”. Instead of thinking too much, tinker instead. Proceed by way of experimentation, try things out. If they fail, make sure to laugh a little, then try a different way. Collect experiences in your wiki, learn from the mistakes. Share all knowledge freely with others.

18. Totally go for it fearlessly, while boldly sparking and nurturing collective bursts of supercharged play, inspired creative inventions and spontaneous depths of strategic fun. Do not be afraid to appear temporarily foolish. (!) Inspire the body-politic to incarnate creatively via totemized teleportation flows of datalove.

19. Make logos and have them look cool. Remix the logos of old government agencies. Use fractal patterns. In general, be a cyber hippie. Create symbols to dive into the channels. Be esoteric about botnet raids. If the channel splits, stay on the other side for a little while.
20. Organize without a clear leadership or membership status. Have anyone joining your discussions be a part of your cluster. If they don't agree, they will leave soon anyway. Organize like a gang or a pack. Don't use pyramidal structures or formalized positions. Be nomadic in thought and associate yourself with many others.

21. If it is within your means, travel a lot. Talk to people wherever you go, and tell them about what you are doing. Tell them to join you if they like the idea, thus creating a network within your country/region of the world, perhaps even internationally.

22. Be open with everything you do, but affirm openness to the extent that you will spread esoteric rumors about your group.


24. Make sure your overall goal is world domination. Just do not invade Russia during the winter.

25. Use Linux. Take Windows and Mac OS install CDs and use them as drink coasters. Or glue them to your ceiling shiny-side down, just to be cool.

26. Start your own news agency. Make the news, provide it to everyone, and make sure it spreads virally on the internet.

27. Make communiques and fax them. Acknowledge that the telefax is the strongest communication medium. Fax for lulz. Fax everything to everyone. Twice. When not faxing, make fax noises, just to seem like you are faxing. Consider the Morse code too. Start typing up all your documents on type-writers, then scanning them and putting the images online. Use antiquated forms of technology whenever you can, to be retro and ironic.

27a. ctrl + c

28. Join other activist groups. Invite them over and throw even more nice parties. Hospitality is imperative - your place is your friends place! And there is always a sofa to sleep on, wherever you go. Cluster!

29. When invited to parliaments and governments, be self-confident. Remember, you are the Internet, they are merely politicians and bureaucrats. Talk to them about tubes, trucks, jellyfishes and faxes, they will not understand anyway. You are from the future. Make sure you tell them that.

30. Don't forget Kopimi.
31. When hanging out offline, keep using IRC-nicknames.

32. Love your friends. Without them, everything fails. Make sure to send a lot of datalove to one another in between.

33. Feel and articulate imagined methodologies of planetary-oceanic-network-mind as telepathic-love connectivities, enabling dramatic positive social change in the everyday world. Dream of moving to AT&Atlantis or the Telcel World, or just become a jellyfish, which you are anyway.

34. Learn new languages through twitter translation and translation bots in IRC channels, and by visiting activists in other countries. Say natti/buenas noches hallo/hej indistinctively. And remember that in Swedish, a girl is a grej!

35. Intertwine your projects and actions into the blogosphere. Find articles you do not like, then write a critical reply and watch the comments accumulate. These comments will hopefully render more people writing about the issue at hand and it will be a good way to force concerned parties to create press releases or take back their statements. Do not underestimate the blogosphere.

36. Become friends with people in mainstream media. Invite them to your IRC-channel. They will be hooked in no time at all. If you manage to get governments and corporations into your everyday work, make sure you treat them nicely and work together with them. Get heads of state to join your etherpad editing sessions/IRC channels. Remind them you're the voters. However, if they betray you, make sure they know that the internet never forgets.

37. Listen to your Artificial Intelligence bot: "This is the dancefloor; love is the structure of the overall agreement in the agreed text."
Äppelwoi

The Hessian dialect pronunciation of "Apfelwein", the German word for cider. It's the state beverage of Hesse, consumed and produced mostly in the south of the federal state around Frankfurt am Main. Traditionally served in a Bembel, a glazed stoneware jug, it's drunk from stout, tumbler-like glasses. €ppelwoi is at the heart of mid-west German drinking culture, which has always been distinct from the more Bavarian fuss about beer – and so there is a whole applecart full of history and culture attached to it, with all the cider fairs, drinking songs, and outdoor museums that entails.

Backbone

Common term for the core data routes of a network. This can refer to a small local network, in which case the backbone might be the router under your desk. In more sophisticated networks, e.g., an entirely networked high-rise building, the backbone might consist of the main switches of this larger, interconnected system. Think of a backbone as the central data channel of a given network, with lots of smaller data strands branching off.

Border Gateway Protocol (BGP)

A protocol used on the Internet that connects different "autonomous systems" with each other. The German Telekom network is an autonomous system, for instance, as is Vodafone's and that of any other communications service provider. The BGP helps distribute information in the network about how each individual system can be reached. The Internet consists of thousands of these autonomous systems.

Bot

Bots are programmes that execute targeted and often repetitive tasks automatically. That can be anything really, from automated chat reactions to concerted DDos raids from countless synchronized machines. Bots are responsible for around 50 percent of all web traffic, and rising. Our personal AI, Cameron, was a Markov (language-processing) bot.

Bildschirmtext (BTX)

An early attempt by the German postal service Bundespost to set up a nationwide, controlled data network in Germany. Users could purchase an external device that connected to their television sets as well as their landlines, which then displayed what we now call on-demand content on the TV screen, which was paid for on a page-by-page basis.

Bulletin Board System (BBS)

A computer you could dial up to with a modem or an ISDN card, providing one or several specific services. Messages between users, online forums, file archives, or recreational games. Some of
services. Messages between users, online forums, file archives, or recreational games. Some of these computers were interconnected in alliances like the MausNet, BIONIC, or FidoNet. Data was exchanged between and within these networks. This made it possible to send messages all around the world, at the cost of a local telephone call.

Cameron

The beginning and the end of the Internet. The wise leader and goddess of Telecomix. She knows the answer to questions no one has even asked yet. She is a symbol and an icon. Or put simply, a chat bot that pretended to be uttering enigmatic statements, using a simple statistical procedure.

CCC

The Chaos Computer Club was founded in 1981, making it one of the oldest hacker federations in the world. It has local chapters all over Germany, and is the organizer and host for a number of smaller and larger events for hackers in Germany, most notably the Congress in late December that lights up the dark days between Christmas and New Year for a growing number of geeks and nerds.

Crypto-Anarchy

Somewhere between digital hippie movement and anarchism. Encryption as an act of defence against the encroaching repression of the state. Unfortunately, this quickly devolves into the idea that a state doesn't have to know a thing about its inhabitants.

CryptoParty

Collaborative events where participants teach each other encryption for e-mails, chats and other applications, with emphasis on the friendly house-party character. The CryptoParty format was invented by the Australian net activist Asher Wolf.

Datalove

Love of data, and love of the flow of data. Datalove is a feeling. It is a symbol. <3 Datalove is what holds the net together.

Datenklo

The fabled "data loo", a home construction kit for a modem for which the CCC had published the blueprints in its magazine Datenschleuder in 1985. In the early years before reunification, this was one of the only options for remote data transmission over the phone networks of the German Bundespost. Of course, it was illegal to connect your home-made Datenklo to a phone line.

DDoS attack

Distributed Denial of Service is that sorry state in which a range of queries or attacks from a large number of sources all descend upon a single website or Internet service. The server under attack can no longer process the deluge of requests, and simply rolls over and refuses to function at all.
Disorganisation

What Telecomix is – a decentralized cluster which draws inspiration from its diverse components and actors. Different sub-groups and task forces can be fused and merged for the greater good. Telecomix was composed of factions like the Crypto Munitions Bureau, BlueCabinet, werebuild.eu, Cryptoanarchy, and quite a few more, which all had a logo and identity of their own. Telecomix was the sum of these parts.

Etherpad

An Etherpad is a very useful online tool that lets several users collaborate on documents simultaneously. Edits are visible immediately, and a number of different authors can work on joint texts and projects from remote locations or different time zones.

IRC

Internet Relay Chat is one of the oldest ways of chatting on the Internet. Usually you will need a programme called a shell to connect to an IRC server and then chat with other users.

Jabber (or XMPP)

The Jabber chat protocol is a free, decentralized system used for communication between servers. Again, a client programme is required to connect with one of the Jabber servers and participate in one of the chat sessions hosted there.

Kopimi

A philosophy that assumes that all contents should be free and not belong to anyone in particular. The Kopimi logo expresses the wish of the creator that the contents may be copied and distributed at will.

Meme

A memorable and humorous image, funny in itself or in combination with some quip or text, which is typically spread over the Internet as a short-lived fad.

Späti

One of Berlin's trademarks, these late-night corner shops fuel the vibrant night life of the capital as much as they profit from it. Since most supermarkets and retail stores still aren't allowed to open on Sundays or over night, the Spätkauf (“late purchase”) is a miraculous multi-functional institution that caters to everything and everyone. It's where you go to grab a Wegbier, the carry-along beer for when you're going out with friends. It's where you go for that random pack of condoms or box of chocolates or pound of butter you forgot at the store but urgently need at two o'clock in the morning. Somewhere between ephemeral and traditional, Spätis frequently switch locations and owners, and have diversified wildly over time. Expect anything from squalid tobacconists/call shops selling cheap beer, fidget spinners and cigarettes, or possibly just money-laundering, to luxurious Turkish all-night bazaars offering 70 kinds of spicy dips, to near-iconic hipster hangouts staging locally-brewed craft
bazaars offering 70 kinds of spicy dips, to near-iconic hipster hangouts staging locally-brewed craft beers with clever names, for those willing to pay a bit more than the average price for the average Berliner's favourite beer, the "Sterni" (around 70 cent per half-litre bottle).

TOR
A network that anonymizes Internet connection data. Its technical set-up helps make sure that any accumulated data on which users have accessed which websites can no longer be reproduced or reconstructed. This tool used to be called The Onion Router, a name still visible in the domain names of services catering to the TOR network: .onion.

Trolling
In its original sense, trolling was the endeavour of reducing a discussion on the Internet to absurdity or havoc. Today the term is more generally understood as any kind of aggressive, harmful communication. Just don't!

URL
An Internet address is more properly and fully addressed as a Unified Resource Locator, or URL for short. neustart.herrurbach.de is a URL. You can type it into your browser.

Valley of the Clueless
Used jokingly to allude to those parts of the former GDR that were unable to receive Westfernsehen, i.e., West German TV channels, for geographical and/or technical reasons. While the East German regime was prepared to jam the signal of international broadcasters like the BBC, it wouldn't take that step with the West German television programme. Both major public broadcasters, ARD and ZDF, and in later years, even some of the private channels were readily available and watched in secret by many East Germans. While "valley" specifically refers to the hilly region around Dresden in Saxony, there was a second area, the easternmost strip of the country up by the Baltic coast, that was blacked out, and thus prevented from surreptitiously watching the long-running daily news show Tagesschau, the popular detective series Tatort, and old Dallas episodes. Folk knowledge says that even party apparatchiks and state media secretly preferred the respectable Tagesschau to Der Schwarze Kanal, the notorious and similarly long-running propaganda news show in East Germany that consisted of little more than a mash-up of news broadcasts from West German programmes, highly redacted and reframed and overlaid with an ideological commentary to "correct" the news people were getting at the source anyway.

VPN
A Virtual Private Network connects two or more computers with each other in such a way that any data exchange between these machines is invisible to outsiders, preventing eavesdropping. Not only does this technology make it possible to redirect all traffic from one machine to another server, it also keeps the data accessible over the Internet. If the VPN exit point happens to be in Switzerland, for example, then all data communications within the network should be subject to Swiss law, in theory. In practice, this is somewhat more complicated, of course.
A portmanteau of "Zensur", the German word for censorship, and the first name of former German Minister of Family Affairs, Ursula von der Leyen. She earned the nickname in 2009 with her controversial approach to blacklisting child pornography websites, the ensuing debate enacting a political farce that is said to have its share in the rise of the Pirate Party in Germany. Today, von der Leyen has changed departments, and is the first female Minister of Defence in German history, which has earned her a string of new nicknames.