Tracing Information Society is the new project of the Technopolitics Working Group. This informal group began in February 2010 and comprises about 10 core members and about 30 contributors. Most of us work as artists, theoreticians, curators or journalists inside and outside major institutions. What brings us together is an interest in the impossible project of analyzing the Information Society as an open totality, that is, an integrated network of actors and events with dimensions that change depending on the perspective taken. The aim is to produce cultural criticism and art works that engage with the deeper structures of the present as a contribution to the globally distributed efforts of transforming them.

The concept of the Information Society, after being over-hyped in the 1980s and 1990s and used as a pretense for many dubious political projects (for example, by Newt Gringrich or Tony Blair) at the time, has fallen out of use lately. This offers us the freedom to re-purpose it as an umbrella term to connect multiple strands that drive complex societal transformations. One strand is the emergence of a distinct techno-economic paradigm, usually called post-fordism, following the economic crisis of the 1970s. Since the 1990s, processes of financialization have become ever more important. Another strand concerns the political transformation that brought about a system of governance which privileges market-structures in all areas of life—what is usually called neo-liberalism. A third strand is the social transformations and pluralizations of subjectivity, of gender and of what has become known as the non-human that challenge the dominant models of Western universalism and of patriarchy. A fourth strand has been created by environmental movements which have begun to transform the human relationship to nature, a task made all the more urgent by the increasingly pressing reality of climate change. Using the concept of the Information Society as an umbrella – like the
group’s own title Technopolitics—emphasizes the role of the technological infrastructures that underpin, though do not determine, all of these developments. Culture, society, nature and our own agency cannot be conceived of independently of these technological capacities.

The conceptual and technological foundations of the Information Society were laid in the first half of the 20th century. As a social formation it became dominant in the USA and Europe in the 1970s and globally after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989. There is a considerable debate whether the contemporary economic and political transformation following the economic crisis, which started in 2008, necessitates a new umbrella term or not.

The goal of this impossibly large project is not to produce a new master narrative but to provide a framework for inquiry that is, at the same time, internally coherent and open to heterogeneous inputs and outputs. Even more, this project also provides complementary and competing pathways through an expansive and still shifting terrain. The coherence is provided by the emphasis on the simultaneous presence of all of these strands in all fields of inquiry while the openness is provided by an extreme variety of methods of research and formats of output. Thus, the projects cannot be contained within the knowledge practices provided by academia or the art system alone.

The main method of operation of the working group are regular, convivial face-to-face meetings, often with a potlatch of drinks and food, in which one member or invited guest presents his or her current research/artistic project as work in progress, which is then subjected to sympathetic but rigorous criticism from the point of view of the overall framework. These meetings, while not formally closed, are not aimed at a general public and are not recorded.

After a series of public talks we decided to engage together in a material project that couples artistic as well as theoretical research and practice and initiated Tracing Information Society – A Timeline. The timeline provides a format that is both clearly structured—everything is organized according to its datum—and open to multiple perspectives as of what constitutes a relevant event. The value of a timeline is not to signal the return to a simple linear chronological model of historical development but to show the parallelism of heterogeneous events. So, for example, the year 1962 brings, among others, two entries next to each other: one is Beat the Dealer – probability theory and computation meet casino-gambling the other is the publication of Fritz Machlup’s groundbreaking empirical study of the “knowledge economy.” It is the claim of the project that these events, while usually not considered together, are nevertheless directly related to one another.

The timeline—in its current manifestation in print measures 2.8 x 7 meters—shows data on six main layers, color-encoded, and annotated with keywords that are considered relevant for the coming into being of this social formation. As heterogeneous as both the entries and the group are—there is no binding theory—they all come from a critical angle and hence articulate struggles and contradictions as well as turning points (such as major political events and natural disasters) via individual entries in a single but multilayered timeline. The idea was to bring things into a relation that is not necessarily a causal one. By showing things together, new associations arise.

The Timeline is a work-in-progress with a participatory angle: the visitors of the exhibition are invited to make suggestions of their own and insert them in box placed next to the Timeline print. The Timeline can serve several functions: it serves as a heuristic device; by exploring new cross-connections such as in the example given above, it gives new insights into the process of self-instituting of information society; the printed Timeline can be shown in exhibitions and allow visitors to explore associations, memories and inspirations of their own; it can also be used as a teaching device, in workshops, and in particular in an extra-university and activist context. The aim is to produce further versions of the timeline and to incorporate more diverse viewpoints as to which are the defining events in the historical development of the Information Society. Future versions of the work will include a digital version and an exhibition which transposes the 2D timeline into 3D exhibition space and electronic space.

To discuss the conceptual outreach, the potentials, and the implications of the project, a round table discussion will be held on November 19th, 7 pm.
Tracing Information Society so far carries the shared input of: John Barker, Sylvia Eckermann, Doron Goldfarb, Armin Medosch, Gerald Nestler, Felix Stalder, Axel Stockburger, Matthias Tarasiewicz, Thomas Thaler and Ina Zwerger. Graphic Design: Fatih Aydogdu. The first version is on view at the exhibition SOCIAL GLITCH. Radical Aesthetics and the Consequences of Extreme Events from September 25 - December 5, 2015. [2]

REFERENCES
