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From the digitization of culture to digital culture

Some thoughts on Digital Culture*

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Abstract

This essay considers some of the implications of the momentous changes being brought about by new digital technologies, particularly in relation to conceptions of the subject, the consumer and community.

Keywords

web 2.0, digital culture, internet of things

Algunes reflexions sobre la cultura digital

Resum

Aquest article examina algunes de les implicacions dels transcendents canvis que comporten les noves tecnologies digitals, sobretot amb relació a les concepcions del subjecte, el consumidor i la comunitat.

Paraules clau

web 2.0, cultura digital, internet dels objectes

One of the concomitants of our current digital culture is the sense of rapid change. It is the increasingly rapid development and complexity of technology that is making things change so rapidly. Our technologies are always in the process of changing us and our relationship with our environment. The difference is the rate at which this change is taking place. For the first few million years of hominoid and human tool use, change would have been more or less imperceptible. Then, within the last twenty to thirty thousand years, developments started to pick up pace. By the time we arrive at the modern era, technology is developing at an incredible rate (for those of us in the 'developed' world at least). Finally, the last one hundred or so years have seen more and

more rapid technological change and development than in all of previous human history.

One of the results of this accelerating rate of growth is that it is increasingly hard, if not impossible, for us to fully grasp what is going on. Though most of us are aware of other technological developments and issues –for example, questions of nuclear power and nuclear weaponry, industrial production and its effects on the environment, diminishing energy reserves and the search for renewable and sustainable sources of energy– our most vivid encounter with technology and experience of its capacity for change is likely to be through our media, which are changing and developing in extraordinary and unprecedented ways. This

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is particularly true of digital media, such as the internet and the world wide web, mobile telephony and digital video, which either enable us now to do things we did before more often and more easily, or to do things we could previously barely imagine.

More dramatically, they are in the process of transforming not just our world, but our very selves, how we understand who we are. They are changing everything, including the idea of *media* itself (already a problematic and contentious term). And this is the problem: almost by definition any radical transformations brought about by the media are impossible to fully grasp at the time they are taking place. This is because how we understand the world is structured by and accessible through our media (if you use the term in the broadest sense, to include, for example, language). There is not, indeed there cannot be, a point outside of our media from which we can have some kind of privileged un- or premeditated perspective on any aspect of our existence, let alone that of media itself.

Consider how someone in Europe in the late fifteenth century might have understood the development of printing. However educated he or she might have been, it is unlikely that they could have grasped the full implications of this new media technology, or the dramatic effects it would have on Western and, eventually, global culture and society. His or her way of thinking would have evolved within and for a particular 'media ecology' and thus would not be fit for comprehending new emerging media conditions. It is surely far more likely that, in the late fifteenth century at least, printing would still have been regarded as an extension or more efficient scribal practice, a kind of prosthesis or substitute for the production of texts by hand, not as the means for a wholesale transformation of the intellectual environment.

We are perhaps at a similar moment in our understanding of the transformations being wrought by our new technologies. But this is to fall into the trap of thinking of current technological and media change in terms of earlier such transformations. Much as military planners are always said to be making preparations to re-fight the last war, rather than the new one they are going to be confronted with, we can only understand new media in terms of old. It is possible that the ability to fully grasp the implications of the transformations wrought by printing only occurs when print culture itself has begun properly to be superseded by electronic, 'post-print' culture. If we were capable of understanding the changes around us, then they would not truly be changes, but merely developments of the present situation.

All we can do therefore is to map the changes we see in the hope of maintaining our grasp on our rapidly changing situation. Despite all the predictions about the so-called *Y2K bug*, the new millennium did not see the breakdown of banking computer systems, or the collapse of the systems governing the distribution of welfare provision, or even the operational failure of medical equipment, air conditioning systems, elevators, electricity grids, traffic or air-traffic control systems or any other system that uses

digital technology, let alone the accidental launching of nuclear missiles. Yet, the new century had barely begun when another apocalyptic event took place that, though not directly caused by or linked to digital technology, revealed the precariously inter-linked nature of the emerging digital culture.

On 6 September 2001 an exhibition by the artist Wolfgang Staehle called 2001 opened at the Postmasters Gallery in New York. Staehle was already recognized as a pioneer of art involving the Internet. In 1991 he had founded *The Thing*, a bulletin board that became one of the first and most influential forums for the discussion of new media art and theory. By the time of his Postmasters show Staehle had developed a distinctive practice involving the projection of high-resolution digital images onto gallery walls. What made these images unusual was that they were coming from a realtime live feed, refreshed every few seconds. In effect the spectator was seeing the view represented more or less as it actually was at the moment of viewing.

For this exhibition Staehle had projected three such real-time images: one of the Fernsehturm, the distinctive and recognizable television tower in Berlin; one of Comburg, a monastery near Stuttgart; and a view of Lower Manhattan from a camera positioned in Brooklyn. Seen in normal circumstances, Staehle's images convey an experience of stillness, despite being more or less live, and brilliantly bring into question the difference between live and still imagery, and the broader issues of time and representation. In the case of the image of Lower Manhattan, this stillness was shattered five days later in a most extraordinary and unpredictable fashion, when the World Trade Center, which dominated the projected view, was attacked and destroyed by two hijacked aircraft.

Staehle himself was not particularly pleased by the unanticipated and uncalled-for fame and even notoriety that the terrorist event brought to this particular exhibition. Nevertheless it helped delineate an important connection between the real-time technology used by Staehle and the context in which the attacks took place and were received. He was taking advantage of the extraordinary capacity of new digital networks and new technologies to make information and representations immediately available, which in turn is transforming our relation to events as they happen and also transforming the nature of those events themselves.

This is nicely indicated by the title of a book about the attacks written by Middle East expert and academic Fred Halliday, *Two Hours that Shook the World*. Halliday's title clearly refers to journalist John Reed's classic eyewitness account of the Bolshevik revolution of October 1917, *Ten Days that Shook the World* (1919). The difference between the two titles indicates with admirable economy the increasing speed at which world-transforming events take place. This speeding up is directly related to the increasing ubiquity and availability of media, digital and otherwise, through which such events can be witnessed. News of the events during the Russian Revolution was only obtainable afterwards through print media such as newspapers. By the time



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of the September 11 attacks it was possible for people all over the world to watch the assaults more or less as they took place and to witness the aftermath, including the dramatic collapse of the towers themselves.

Furthermore, this was not just possible through mainstream media such as television but also through news websites. In fact the demand for news was so great that the internet more or less seized up and many people abandoned it and turned to radio and television. Nevertheless the speed at which news of the attacks went around the globe was evidence of a highly interconnected world brought together, in part at least, by new media and new technologies. Soon after, bulletin boards and chat rooms on the web became host to an extraordinary proliferation of eyewitness accounts, images, debates, conspiracy theories and accusations about the attacks.

In place of the hierarchical mass media model of communication flowing from the centre outwards, we glimpse a more distributed flat or bottom-up paradigm. It means that media companies will be increasingly obliged to take notice of the expectations of a new kind of consumer (and perhaps even a new kind of subject); one who does not expect to be treated as an anonymous invisible passive consumer, but an active user of media, who is used to creating their own means of responding to needs and desires. Blogs are often cited as one of the principle phenomena of the so-called *web 2.0*, the name given to the conception of the world wide web as a space for collaboration and reciprocal communication.

Among these developments are social network software such as MySpace, Bebo, Facebook and Second Life (which involves users interacting in a shared virtual three-dimensional space), or YouTube, Flickr and del.icio.us, which respectively allow video clips, photographs and web bookmarks to be uploaded to the web; peer-to-peer software such as Napster and BitTorrent for sharing digital music and video files; powerful search engines, most famously Google; new forms of public debate and self expression, such as blogs and podcasts; and new forms of organizing and distributing knowledge, such as Wikipedia. In particular, the kinds of online communities fostered by MySpace and other similar sites, for example Bebo and Facebook, as well as link and file-sharing software such as Flickr and de.li.co.us, are encouraging a new understanding of how it is possible to make the media responsive to personal needs and niche concerns.

It may be that most people do not take advantage, at first anyway, of these possibilities. Nevertheless, such possibilities will determine how the media will be structured and considered. The transformations in the media brought about by new technologies are transforming how we think about ourselves. In particular we are no longer passive consumers of the media, but, increasingly, also active producers. At the most banal this means that through technologies such as Tivo or the iPod we can programme our media content as we wish, rather than in the way it is presented to us by television or record companies. In one sense this is neither new

nor, strictly speaking, a digital phenomenon. From the moment recordable video cassettes and audio cassettes were first available we no longer had to watch a programme at the moment it was broadcast, or listen to the contents of a record in the sequence it was put together.

Banal as this might seem, it was transformative for how we related to media products, such as television and music. The period in which video and audio recording technologies became widely available also saw the beginnings of sampling and mixing in popular music, in which found material was reused to make new tracks, which can be seen as a prefiguring of our current shift from passive consumption to active production. But there is an important difference between these earlier analogue phenomena and the new digital means of controlling how one consumes media content. The former were subordinate to the mainstream media, such as records, radio and television, which still determined in general how their content was consumed, whereas the new technologies are fundamentally altering our relation to media in a profound and radical way.

The social network spaces MySpace or Facebook reveal something about the way in which web 2.0 is being used. Browsing on either is a fascinating, if rather voyeuristic, experience. Individual users' web pages can be customised and contain personal information, pictures of friends who are also on MySpace, accompanied by a message stating how many friends the user has, and displays of often rather intimate email messages from those friends. (When it first started, one of the people identified as a founder of MySpace, Tom Anderson, would be the first 'friend' each subscriber had online. By clicking on a link on each page it's possible to see pictures of and links to all of a user's friends, with Tom always among them. Thus the satirical/ self-pitying t-shirt slogan 'Tom is my only friend'. By spring 2008 Tom had 221,036,100 friends. Following the purchase of MySpace by Rupert Murdoch's News Corporation, Tom is now a corporate identity rather than a reference to a specific individual.)

The customization of the page by users and presentation of personal information act as a kind of visible self-creation. The messages are also links to the other users' own web pages, which means that it is possible to browse across complex webs of connections. In MySpace there are also links to music or to videos from sites such as YouTube. Both MySpace and FaceBook offer a glimpse of a new kind of community, one no longer bound up with physical location, but created through shared interest in and self-definition by media. The above might suggest that with new digital media and networks we are either glimpsing the emergence of a new 'participatory culture' of greater cooperation or solidarity, or alternatively our digital culture runs the risk of producing a pandemonium of competing media noise, self-promotion and meaningless disembodied interaction, in an increasingly atomized society. But perhaps another response is possible, or even necessary, one that goes beyond such an opposition between greater



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cooperation and increasing atomization. We live in a world in which we are increasingly both bound together and separated by the globalized networks of information communications technologies. It is perhaps unsurprising that the concept of 'friendship' has become more visible and important as traditional forms of community are eroded, and new forms of subjectivity and connection are being developed. Yet in a situation where Tom can claim to have well above 200 million friends, the very term *friendship* needs rethinking. Thus, what our increasingly networked digital culture may need is a new 'politics of friendship', new conceptions of the relation between self and other, and new understandings of community.

It may be that we will have to expand our notion of who or what might be part of any future community, especially given the increasing capacity for participation. Back in the 1950s and '60s it was seriously proposed that computers would be able to achieve some kind of intelligence, or even consciousness. Based on an outmoded modernist conception of cognition as an interior process, artificial intelligence, at least as it was originally understood, has been largely discredited. But more recent developments, many of which came out of AI, are presenting us with objects and technologies that can act, communicate, signify and participate, even

if these capacities do not seem to involve anything like human intelligence or consciousness. Examples include recent research into developing simple forms of intelligent behaviour by combining robotics with neural networks, as undertaken by computer scientist Rodney Brooks at MIT. It is unlikely that, in the foreseeable future, even minimally intelligent robots are going to trouble our everyday lives. By contrast, far smaller and less potentially impressive developments are already provoking questions about the capacity for technology to act and participate. Recently a new buzz phrase has been coined: the *Internet of Things* refers to the new world of networked and interconnected devices, which can communicate with each other and with other systems and entities.

Such developments indicate the more momentous changes taking place in our current digital culture, changes that affect every aspect of our lives and which are increasingly hard to discern, as they become increasingly easy to take for granted. In particular we are arriving at a point where digital technologies are no longer merely tools, but increasingly participants in our increasingly participatory culture, for better or worse. The need to keep questioning our situation remains more pressing than ever, especially as the technology itself is more and more invisible as it becomes an integral part of the very fabric of our existence.

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