FCJ-064 Some thoughts on the evolution of digital media studies

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June 13, 1993 – Can you read that?

in St Kilda, a somewhat run-down, turn of the century beach suburb in Melbourne – glorious architecture, too many cafes now that the intelligentsia have rediscovered its charm – and my friend is in Northcote, across town, only about 15 kilometres away but worlds apart. Northcote is north of the city and while it's still considered to be inner-city by the real estate agents, it is only just beginning its upward spiral towards gentrification. We're playing a networked game of *Doom* on our newly acquired 14400 modems and talking on the telephone. "Yes, yes, I can see you". We're yet to discover the inbuilt text function in the game that would allow us to dispense with the phones and chat via the screens. I'm blown away, metaphorically. And then, literally, as my friend seizes the opportunity to waste me.

As we progressed to modem chats and MUDs, I became acutely aware of the ways in which the concept of presence was reshaping my media world. No longer here or there, we were now here and there simultaneously. Of course, synchronous internet transactions did not constitute my first encounters with virtual presence or telepresence. I'd watched live television; I'd spoken on the telephone. This was something different.

As my Northcote friend would later put it:

> Apart from the dramatic reconfiguration of spatio-temporal relations implicit in telepresence, the social and metaphysical fallout of remote sensing is considerable. Discussion of what it means to engage remotely with others constitutes a major focus of debate within the thriving academic discourse of cyberculture. (Tofts, 1998: 16)

Obviously, all media allow us to engage with others remotely. All media operate by virtue of presence – bringing one interlocutor into contact with another or many other interlocutors in a way that allows the participants to feel as though they are sharing the same space or time or both. However, traditional mediums such as radio, television and film, which at the time were the focus of most courses devoted to media studies, had not been thought about in quite these terms before. At the time of my initial immersion into the world of the virtual, I was teaching radio production and criticism. It was my first academic appointment. Most of my teaching took place in studios equipped with reel-to-reel tape machines, mixing desks and microphones. My aims were pretty much in line with most people teaching media production at the time – teach the students the basics of recording, editing, writing and announcing. Introduce them to the world of professional and community radio, place radio in some sort of historical context. Inevitably, students would graduate to take their place somewhere in 'the media'. The emphasis on the media as something outside of our selves was prevalent in media studies at the time. The media was something we did things with – communicated an idea, told a story, exchanged information. Rethinking radio as a medium of telepresence suddenly turned all of this on its head because it shifted my focus away from 'the media' to the act of mediation itself.

I realize of course that I was only catching up to others who had already understood that the boundaries between such things as the media and the audience, writing and speech, inside and outside could not be sustained. *Il n'y a pas de hors-texte*. In fact, as I was awakening to the importance of mediation, others had already moved on. As individual mediums converged into the polysemic digital space of the computer in the mid to late 1990's, and as I put away my cutting block and learned to adjust levels in Cool Edit, writers such as Tofts were already pointing out that convergence was leading us towards a 'dramatic shift from mediation to immediation, from transitive exchange to intransitive differal' (Tofts, 1998: 116).

August 12, 1994 – Beyond the tag

Buoyed by the thrill of updating my computer from 2MB to 4MB of RAM and encouraged by the release of Netscape Navigator 1.0, I pestered our Information Resources librarian to teach me the basics of hypertext markup language. Without the advantage of WSIWYG software, my earliest forays into web publishing were made possible by Windows Notepad, a sympathetic University webmaster and an earnest enthusiasm for the transformative potentialities of the web.

Although I was mildly enamored with surfing the web (and hey, it sure as hell beat Gopher), all that waiting around for cheesy graphics to download was still less fun than reading a book. What really attracted me to the medium were its publishing possibilities. This interest was twofold. Firstly, I could immediately see the potential for an online subject website that housed all of the material that my radio production students might need to complete their assignments. This has led to an ongoing interest in how we can use the web for not only the delivery of course materials but as part of the very fabric of pedagogy itself.[1]

10 Secondly, the web seemed to me to be an extension of the 'make your own media' ethic that had driven me into radio in the first place. Of all the mass media, radio is undoubtedly one of the more accessible in terms of participation. Since the 1970′s in Australia, the community radio sector has flourished, driven by a growing mistrust of the narrow focus and concentrated ownership of the commercial media networks and a desire for a greater diversity of voices on the airwaves. While pundits wax lyrical about "grassroots journalism" and "participatory media" in relation to blogs and wikis, they seem to forget the incredible contribution radio has made to this bottom up mode of working. I'd always felt that radio provided students with an opportunity to be able to become the media, rather than merely the consumers of media. The web in its infancy seemed to me like a natural place to extend this ethic of making rather than consuming.

11 My early experiences of teaching hypertext markup language (html) to predominantly Humanities students were exhilarating and exasperating. While many were excited at the prospect of learning a set of technical skills that would help them to participate in the emergent telematic noosphere, an equal number were intimidated by the technology.[2] Apart from the obvious conceptual difficulties that html presents to novices, Australian students had to also learn to spell like Americans (we spell center as centre and color as colour, for example). These difficulties were further compounded by the fact that, as a markup language, html required students to be thinking explicitly about visual rhetoric in ways that they had not done before. What are the semantics of colour or of font styles? What makes blinking text so annoying?

12 I still teach code when I teach HTML. Students are required to mark up their first html document 'by hand' using a simple text editor. This is only partly a kind of nostalgia for the craft of media making. Learning to write code without the aid of proprietary software releases students (albeit temporarily) from the stranglehold that such software places on the process of creation. The old resistances to mainstream media die hard. More importantly, from a pragmatic perspective, knowing a little code can help them to get themselves out of the tangle of autocode functions that seem to come bundled with programs like Dreamweaver.

13 The increasing emphasis on proprietary software in digital media studies is creating a generation of students who work on the surface of technology without understanding the processes behind that creation. It is not uncommon to hear students talk about their proficiencies in Flash but not animation or Photoshop but not image manipulation. Rather than seeing these programs as tools they are seeing them as ends in themselves. Whack a filter on an image and whammo – instant art! They even talk about wanting to learn 'computer'. I usually point out that this is akin to wanting to learn 'pencil'.

14 It is important to teach students that acquiring proficiencies is not an end in itself. In any case, more and more students are arriving at university with established digital media proficiencies and can probably teach their teachers more things about Flash than they thought it was possible to know.[3] Finding a reason to use these technologies in interesting and creative ways seems to be a far more urgent project.

April 1, 1995 – A Chance Meeting With a Lemur

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> In the same way that the practice of reading privately and silently contributed to the formation of "self", so too will performing hyperrhetoric contribute to a new subjectivication in the electronic apparatus (in which one will have to find a new term of self-reference, neither "parrot" [to use Lacan's example] as in the clan identity of the oral apparatus nor "me" in the individualism of literacy. (Ulmer, 1994: 38)

16 At the point at which I began to question the value of teaching digital media for its own sake, I came across the writings of Gregory Ulmer, Professor of English at the University of Florida. After reading *Heuretics: The Logic of Invention* (1994), I backtracked to *Teletheory: Grammatology in the Age*

of Video (1989) and *Applied Grammatology: Post(e)-pedagogy from Jacques Derrida to Joseph Beuys* (1985) and in doing so found an approach that positioned electronic culture within a framework that made action possible. Ulmer's applied approach to digital media turned everything on its head. Rather than seeing digital media as something that you could apply a theory to, Ulmer's concept of electracy allowed me to see that digital media could be used to invent new theories, new modes of seeing and being in the world.

17 Digital media is more than just a set of tools –it is part of an apparatus that refers not only to the technologies of computing but also to the ideologies and institutional practices assigned to or produced by those technologies. If the print apparatus produces the currently dominant critical and interpretative modes of inquiry in learning (critique and hermeneutics), then how might the apparatus of electracy produce a logic of invention?

18 While many of the hypertext theorists I had been reading at the time had been prepared to argue that hypertext, as a technology of electronic writing, was by its very nature revolutionary – embodying a poststructuralist view of language – Ulmer was arguing that we need an electronic theoria.[4] That is, writing electonically does not automatically take us outside literate practices or involve the development of new rhetorical strategies. Any cursory glance at the metaphors used in computing – the desktop, folders and files, webpages, and so on – signal the ways in which electronic writing is tied up with the practices of print literacy. What was (and arguably still is) needed to achieve the transition was the invention of new modes of writing specific to the electronic environment itself, taking into account the full potential of literacy as it converged with a new apparatus, and remembering that the technology of electronic writing is only one aspect of the apparatus. This was heady stuff!

19 I continue to try and teach mystory as a new electronic genre in a subject that I teach called 'Electronic Writing'.[5] Because it is not caught up in the hype of 'new media', it remains relevant. The invention of a mode of discourse for the electronic apparatus is most definitely a work in progress.

February 29, 2001 – Like Minds Think Alike

20 My mother has recently acquired an email account. She insists on writing letters to me that are in no way different from the ones she would have written by hand. They're long and full of family gossip and trivia. They're also strangely formal – she signs off "Yours sincerely". She's extremely intolerant of my tardy and epigrammatic responses. Pointing out that I get about 100 emails a day does nothing to assuage this intolerance.

21 The acceleration in communications made possible by email in the past decade has wrought significant changes in the ways in which all academics work. Aside from the incessant chirping of "You've got mail" brought on by student requests for assignment extensions and appointment requests, the ability to have regular and ongoing contact with colleagues at a distance has transformed the way we undertake both scholarship and pedagogy. Collaborations that were once drawn out and difficult are now able to happen with ease. The evolution of email list culture has reconfigured my approach to digital media studies considerably. I not only teach students about lists in relation to questions of telepresence and textuality but we now also actively use lists for the purposes of teaching.[6]

22 As well as the direct impact list culture has had on the classroom, my engagement with lists has brought me into contact with like minded colleagues from around the world. The network of scholars engaged with digital media studies is not vast. As a nascent area of study, we often find ourselves ghettoed off at more mainstream academic events on the 'tech' panels. Academics studying digital media come from a broad palette of more established disciplines – critical theory, media studies, literary studies, art, political economy, information technology, philosophy and so on. What binds us is our interest in the ways in which digital media are reshaping our media landscape.

23 This was the impetus in 2001 for the establishment of the Fibreculture discussion list. Initially set up by Geert Lovink and David Teh, Fibreculture was established to provide a forum for the exchange of articles, ideas and arguments on Australian IT policy in a broad, cultural context. In particular, Fibreculture was and remains interested in the philosophy and politics of new media

arts, information and creative industries, national strategies for innovation, research and development, education, and media and culture.

24 Fibreculture now has over 1000 subscribers.[7] I have acted as a 'facilitator' for the list for the past four years. As well as moderating list discussion, this has involved organizing face to face events, publications and perhaps most successfully playing a role in the establishment of the Fibreculture Journal. As a result of my involvement in Fibreculture, I have developed a keener understanding of the role of networks in a globalised, distributed environment. It also gives me a chance to practice what I teach.

25 The kind of engagement with networked digital technologies that Fibreculture facilitates highlights the ways in which the object and subject of study in digital media studies have increasingly merged. I use distributed networks to talk and think about distributed networks in the same way that I now use wikis and blogs in the classroom in order to engage the students in discussions of wikis and blogs. This kind of self reflexivity is quite unique to digital media studies. Students of literature, for example, were never expected to produce canonical texts for future students of literature. Similarly, students studying film criticism were not always expected to go on and make films. No doubt some did but the object of study in most traditional academic contexts was neatly severed from what was produced. These kinds of divisions are now not so neatly contained. Critics of this kind of approach may want to accuse us of sticking our heads up our own asses, to use a famous Australian expression. However, I'd prefer to think of it as an engaged criticism that refuses to leave the outside world out of the classroom.

September 4, 2004 – I Thought it Was a Phone

26 I'm on a conference panel (predictably with the word 'technology' in its title) at a youth media conference in Newcastle, regional Australia. Sharing the panel with me are two young people from Manchester, England, Fee Plumley and Ben Jones, collectively known as the Phone Book Ltd. The Phone Book Ltd, they tell me, is a creative media agency and they have been exploring mobile phone content since 2000. In the lead up to the presentations, they offer to Bluetooth some content to my phone to show me what they are going to talk about. I have to sheepishly admit to not owning a mobile phone. They look aghast but given that I am at a youth media conference I'm becoming somewhat accustomed to this.

27 Fee and Ben's presentation has me transfixed. They talk about their projects; phonebook, arttones.net and the-sketch-book.[8] I'm simultaneously alert to the creative possibilities of this new medium and to my own nagging dislike of the mobile as the latest technology of privatization and customization. My interest in the creative possibilities of this new medium temporarily wins out.

28 In particular I am drawn to thinking about how mobiles might escape from the predominantly corporate matrix in which they appear to be embedded. And this escape, in the ideal scenario, would be facilitated by users rather than manufacturers. Innovation with new media very often only begins in earnest once a new invention leaves the production line and falls into the hands of consumers. History is littered with examples of users whose ingenuity has reshaped technologies away from their intended purpose. The telephone was originally conceived as means to disseminate culture to the masses and was developed as a broadcast device, not as a communications device. In line with inventor Alexander Graham Bell's intentions, operatic concerts in Boston and Cambridge were transmitted over phone lines in the late nineteenth century. Phonographs, on the other hand, were conceived as a recording apparatus for dictation rather than as a mass distribution device for music. According to Carolyn Marvin, the appearance of a new medium becomes an occasion for a 'drama' played out between different groups and hierarchies within a society as each attempts to assimilate the new media into their existing rituals and habits (Marvin, 1988: 6). This then leads to experimentation as users work through their particular visions and imaginaries in regards to the new medium. Could the mobile be taking this well worn path?

29 I'm yet to be convinced. Perhaps it's a sign that my engagement with digital media over the last decade has led me to develop a degree of cynicism towards the hype that accompanies new technologies and their promises of a better world for everyone. Perhaps it is also an increasing concern I share with others over the turn that digital media seems to be taking away from the

collaborative and the networked towards an increasing emphasis on the personalized and the individualized. Australian critic, Daniel Palmer, notes that mobiles are part of a broader phenomenon that he calls 'participatory media'. However, this is not the participatory media of grassroots journalism and DIY media. It is participatory 'in the sense that its "modes of address" function to blur the line between the production and consumption of imagery' (Palmer, 2005: npn). This produces 'the key forms of mediated visualising practices that make up our shared visual culture' and that 'all forms of media participation need to be considered in relation to defining characteristics of contemporary capitalism – namely its user-focused, customised and individuated orientation' (Palmer, 2005: npn).

30 The repercussions of an increasingly individuated, personalized and customized media culture are profound not only in terms how we approach these developments critically, as scholars and as practitioners but in terms of their effect on the whole project of teaching digital media studies and teaching generally, for that matter. The changes that are taking place in the mediasphere generally and digital media in particular can be seen to be mirrored in the academy. Increasingly, at least in Australia and as a direct result of fee for service education models, students are able to pick and choose subjects on the basis of what they are interested in rather than as a coherent program of study. As Darren Tofts has noted:

31 > There is an increasingly aggressive attitude of individual discretion with which students will determine whether or not it is worth coming to a particular tute or enrol in a particular subject on the grounds that, in advance of any study, it is already irrelevant to their particular needs. This attitude is commonly articulated in the perception that learning is expendable and selective, a perception disclosed in the repertory statement, "I couldn't come to class last week. Did I miss anything important?" (Tofts, 2004: npn)

32 The key words here are of course "in advance of any study". The presumption that students are already in a position to make assessments about their education without the benefit of being educated leads to the institution of a kind of Academic Idol in universities. Courses that are relatively undemanding, fun and focused on student interests are popular; courses that require a degree of hard work and commitment are only chosen by those that don't have better things to do. Now I'm not saying that learning should not be student centered but customizing your program of study so that you are never forced to confront difficult questions, never challenged in your beliefs, as though you were choosing a cable channel rather than a life path, is a little worrying. As Tofts explains:

33 > The emphasis on interactivity and user choice in digital media (whether on or offline computer-based media, digital television, mobile phone content) is a sign of what Richard Sennett has called the "tyranny of intimacy". Participation, once the province of community, of social interaction, is the new currency of individual engagement with real time media. (Tofts, 2004: npn)

34 Inevitably, we will see greater personalization and greater customisation in our engagement with media of all kinds as media converge into the digital. And as a natural consequence of this we will be forced to attend to the social ills that result from this further individualization of media culture. At the risk of sounding hypocritical, I'm able ponder these concerns while accessing Gracenotes as I upload my CD collection to my iPod or downloading a recipe on the networked laptop in our kitchen. But that really is the point. Digital media are now so embedded into the fabrics of our everyday lives it is getting harder and more urgently necessary that we continue to reflect on how we are changing as a result – as individuals, as cultures, as societies and as another species sharing the planet.

35 I am not sure how these forces will play themselves out into the future. I could never have predicted, sitting in my room all those years ago watching my avatar in DOOM bite the dust and be reborn again and again, that digital media may have led me circuitously to where I am now – wherever that is. Perhaps as James Joyce, himself a prescient theorist of new media, would have had it, we can only watch the riverrun ... 'A way a lone a last a loved a long the' (Joyce, 1975: 628)

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Notes

[1] I've written about this extensively elsewhere so I won't elaborate here. See, for example, Gye, L., 'Halflives, A Mystory: Writing Hypertext to Learn', *Fibreculture Journa*l, Issue 2, 2003 https://journal.fibreculture.org/issue2/issue2_gye.html

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[2] I remember one student who, upon seeing a mouse for the first time, picked it up and pointed it at the screen like a remote control, perplexed as to why nothing seemed to be happening

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[3] I remember my astonishment when my then 11 year old son showed me an animation he had painstakingly created in Powerpoint. It hadn't even occurred to me that you could use that program for anything more interesting than boring corporate presentations.

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[4] The earlier work on hypertext of scholars such as George Landow and Jay David Bolter were good examples of the kind of euphoric optimism to which I'm referring here. See, for example, Bolter, Jay David, 2001. *Writing Space: Computers, Hypertext, and the Remediation of Print* (Boston: Lawrence Erlbaum, Assocs). Interestingly, both Bolter and Landow and many others like them toned down their initial enthusiasm for the revolutionary powers of both postructuralist theory and hypertext in their later writings on the subject.

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[5] According to Ulmer, "As a conceptual neologism, "mystory" is the title for a collection or set of elements gathered together temporarily in order to represent my comprehension of the scene of academic discourse. It is an idea of sorts, if nothing like a platonic *eidos*, whose name alludes to several constituent features (generated by the puncept of "mystory")". (Ulmer, 1989: 83)

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[6] My colleague Esther Milne, with whom I teach Issues in Electronic Media, has written extensively about the relations between letter writing, email discussion lists and SMS. Examples of her research can be read in M/C Journal, "'Magic Bits of Paste-board' Texting in the Nineteenth Century" https://journal.media-culture.org.au/0401/02-milne.php and *Fibreculture Journal* "Email and Epistolary technologies: Presence, Intimacy, Disembodiment" https://journal.fibreculture.org/issue2/issue2_milne.html.

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[7] More information about Fibreculture can be found at https://www.fibreculture.org

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[8] For more information on the phonebook ltd projects, see https://www.the-phone-book.com

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