

Master of Creative

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The Virtual Leash

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CERTIFICATE OF ORIGINAL AUTHORSHIP

I certify that the work in this thesis has not previously been submitted for a degree nor has it been submitted as part of requirements for a degree except as fully acknowledged within the text. I also certify that the thesis has been written by me. Any help that I have received in my research work and the preparation of the thesis itself has been acknowledged. In addition, I certify that all information sources and literature used are indicated in the thesis.

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PREFACE

The Lipa (or Linden) tree is considered a sacred tree for the Slavic people with mythological powers to heal and calm all those that stand beneath it. They believe different parts of the tree represent certain aspects of life; the roots buried in the realm of the underworld, the trunk in the mundane of everyday life and the branches reaching out to access the spirits. Many Slavic people grow a Lipa tree near their home to act as a sort of 'telephone' to these other realms.

Like the Lipa tree, social media networks enable the participants to connect, build and share within online communities. In the digital realm, the roots represent the connection to social networks and cyberworld environments. The trunk, the everyday mundane: paying bills, shopping or banking. Whilst the branches reach to future possibilities such as advanced, faster mobile technologies.

When I first proposed this research my interest lay in my personal connection to a minority Slavic group called the Sorbs or Wends (German). The Sorbs, situated in the South-East of Germany are the people of my great, great grandfather who migrated to Adelaide, Australia in 1854. My roots, though distant, gave me a great interest in this often-oppressed community group. Internet sites informed me of their culture, religion and language. I was able to track the Sorbian Diaspora from the mid 1800s to Australia, South Africa and America.

Having Internet access to my historical background meant I was able to contact Sorbian community members in Cottbus, Germany. In 2008 I travelled to meet with these people. From this face-to-face encounter I developed a continuing and expanded connection to the community and I maintained involvement with local discussions and actions on my

return to Australia. Further I found an Australian website www.wendishheritage.org.au and made contact with members whom I later met with to discuss the Sorbian Diaspora and history. Through these communications tools, including websites, email, social media networks and mobile phone technologies such as SMS, MMS and video chat, I formed a strong connection to the Sorbian community even though I lived on the other side of the world.

Today, the digital bond, or as I have termed it, the virtual leash, both constrains and controls what we perceive and our experiences online. For example, to what extent I really feel a part of a community without a physical presence relies on the level of trust I feel with those online. What they choose to disclose frames the level at which I can participate and vice versa. Time zones mean I need to be up in the middle of the night to chat online. Language barriers create communication that is not always obvious and cultural differences can lead to misunderstanding and confusion. As much as I want to embed myself in the community and maintain the virtual leash to my ancestral culture I am still an outsider despite using an Internet connection, though less of a stranger than if it didn't exist.

On a recent overseas trip video chats, emails and mobile phone text messaging maintained a constant 'virtual leash' to home. Once I spent an entire day riding buses to different locations, never once asking for directions, instead using bus and map applications on my phone. On reflection, I realised that the only person I had an in-depth conversation with during that day was my partner in Sydney, Australia via free Wi-Fi at a Starbucks café.

In developing this project I began to identify the freedoms and constraints of a life lived within both off and online communities. Access to family, friends and histories globally allow more connection and expanded interactions, such that previously could only be achieved through the post or echoey transoceanic telephone calls. Bridging the cyber/real divide

through social media networks seems to increase the possibility for a larger social well of relationships but this may come at a cost as deeper levels of understanding is constrained by the technology and through physical detachment. As time passes my contact with the Sorbian community has dwindled to a half dozen emails on special occasions like Easter, Christmas and recently International Women's day. I am planning to visit Cottbus again soon so perhaps that face-to-face encounter will revive my online connection for several more years and the mythology of the Lipa tree acting as a 'telephone' to others may continue.

Post note:

In May 2013 I was invited to give a paper on a section of this research, The Virtual Leash, at a conference in Prague for Interdisciplinary, Cyberculture 8. While there I travelled to Cottbus (near the border of the Czech republic) and met up with several Sorbian 'old' friends. The reception I received was warm and much like an old friend returning, indicating the necessary interaction (in my case) between the real and the virtual.

The paper from the conference is available for viewing on <http://www.inter-disciplinary.net/critical-issues/cyber/cybercultures/conference-programme-abstracts-and-papers/session-1-theories-and-concepts-of-cyberspace-and-cyberculture/>

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ABSTRACT

This exegesis serves to explore the theoretical approaches and empirical evidence of scholarly and political debate on the social relations enabled by the Internet through social media, it is a roadmap that can elucidate the processes of the attached visual and interactive methods of the creative work.

Several key questions are investigated within this research that explore the relationship between the virtual leash as both a tether to cyber connections and as a constraint that binds the user to the connection. These include possible impacts of online connectivity to develop social capital and the further prospect of a blurring of the on/offline dichotomy. It asks can network technologies enhance our relationship to other cultures and identities regardless of a physical presence to increase the possibility of greater global understanding and tolerance?

The exegesis complements the online documentary and a web source, which together contributes the entire assessment for the award of Masters of Creative Arts, (MCA). The creative visual essay provides a snapshot of issues and concerns that exist in present thinking of how, where, and why we embrace network technologies to guide us through virtual environments to both the advantage and the detriment of those connected. The creative work uses visual photography, text messaging, talking heads and disembodied voices to present theories on a research that daily incorporates within our everyday practices.

