

# **Hearing With Light, Seeing with Sound**



## **Aesthetic Journalism as a place for Depth and Difficulty in a Media Life**

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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.

Signature of Student:

Date:

## Acknowledgements

Many people have contributed to this thesis, and I thank them for believing in the value of what follows...

To Sue Joseph, whose supervision was critical when necessary and supportive, thoughtful and pragmatic throughout; to Johnny Bojacá, whose programming advice and expertise helped me turn the concept for *Busking the Silence* into something that can be heard and seen; to Claudia Taranto at Radio National for taking a risk and for giving me the opportunity to hear my ideas as radio; to Belinda Lopez for helping me make the most of that opportunity and for teaching me so much about radio production; to Clara Natalia for her faith and pragmatism; and to my dad, Rick, who encouraged me to end with a question rather than a conclusion, because *you can bury a stick, but you can't bury a worm*: THANK YOU.

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### *Dedicatum*

On April 20, 2011, British photojournalist and multimedia producer Tim Hetherington was killed while reporting from Misrata, where he was one of only a handful of journalists reporting from within Libya. I received the news while researching for this thesis. Hetherington's innovative work and commitment to facilitating thoughtful dialogue across geographic and cultural borders served to remind me that theory's role is not merely to critique practice, but also, and more importantly, to enhance it (Bolter 2003, pp.17-18). This thesis is therefore written and produced for journalists as well as academics, and for anybody else with a concern for the social quality of digitally mediated communication; and it is dedicated to the work and memory of two men – Tim Hetherington and Roger Silverstone – who in their different ways made important contributions to how we perceive and think about media morality.

And this thesis is also written for my son, Oliver, who will grow up in what many people will describe to him as two worlds: one 'developed', one 'underdeveloped'; one speaking English, the other Spanish; one cautiously quiet, the other rambunctiously noisy. I hope that Oliver will recognise his two worlds as one world, recognise that difference is what humanity has in common, and – being able to speak fluently the mother tongues of over a billion people – that he will listen well.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Oliver's generation will also grow up with an additional 'world' known that is often described as 'cyber', 'digital', and even 'social'. It, too, must be considered a sphere of the one world we share.

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## Hearing With Light, Seeing with Sound:

### Aesthetic Journalism as a place for Depth and Difficulty in a Media Life

#### Abstract

A colleague tells me that journalism is still about good writing, and she's right. At the centre of good writing is narrative, the dance between complexity and simplicity, nuance and rhythm. Good journalism engages us with each other and with the world beyond our daily geographical borders; it holds power to account and provides an imperfect agora for public debate; and more often than not its form is digital: text, image and sound stitched together in binary code. This thesis is about the challenge and importance of digital narrative, and the role that photography can play in engaging a digitally connected public with journalism that is not exhausted by a single reading, that employs our imagination and our empathy to delve beneath surface facts, subverting the digital logic of efficiency to sit somewhere between impenetrable overloads and binary simplifications. The possibility and moral importance of this journalism, new in form but old in substance, is the starting point for this thesis as well as its through-line, the point from which the parallel narratives and ideas herein will resonate. Fundamentally, this is a thesis about how we understand each other *in* media, and how creative approaches to digital journalism can make communication productively difficult, deepening our understanding of one another and the world we share.

Media ecology and creative practice are combined to explore the metaphorical 'logics' of digital communication – the Internet's *how, why, what, where* and *when* – and discourses from the disciplines of media morality, journalism studies, sociology and art converge to delineate journalism's place within the blurred spaces of our material-digital, public-private media life. The thesis argues that our capacity to witness in media, our ability and inclination to approach each other with hospitality and proper distance, requires that we continue to properly see and hear each other across the hybrid spaces of digital and smelly media, and that we think critically about the nature of media and our life within it.

## Introduction

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There was a feeling of being misunderstood that had little to do with language, and a park that stretched the two kilometres between a home I shared with a young Chilean family and the *Universidad de Concepción*, where I learned Spanish. In the park I practised the guitar, sitting on a bench or a flight of steps, plucking the strings, seeking refuge from the exhausting serendipity of daily encounters. I played, and people interrupted my practice. Local workers, students, the elderly and the homeless; people who could not see or understand that I had carved a space that was mine, a place where I went to be alone, in solitude. It would have been a healthy solitude, mostly, but in Chile it didn't exist, at least not there. My music was motive for social communion, a conversation point, and the park was a place for conversation between friends and strangers. The interruptions seemed rude at first, an invasion, but I soon learnt to appreciate the cultural differences in the spaces we allow each other.

Since then, ten years ago, I have lived and watched a series of moments that straddle the smudgy line between alone and lonely; instants that occupy the shifting borderlands where constructive solitudes meet an emptiness filled with unsatisfying things. I have collected these moments, and, knowing that my instinctive solitude is in its own way a form of communication, I want to share them. Much of my collecting is written in light – photographs that I have looked for, planned and crafted – but many more have revealed themselves in ways or at times that evaded my camera: casual conversations with friends; the banal silence of a peak-hour train; the tiny boy who, having just learned to walk, is fascinated by the sounds of

his own footsteps echoing off concrete, tiles, steel manholes, and other urban textures under his feet. My memory is engraved with that boy's joy as he stomped, attentive to the world around him. Lacking the image, I write these words, now, to defy the weight of time. And so the journey begins.

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*Given the major dilemmas facing humanity and the planet, the harnessing of media to help us comprehend our transitional universe to intervene in its evolution is less a luxury than an urgent requirement of citizenship.<sup>1</sup>*

**Fred Ritchin**

Good conversation takes shape like movement between two dancers, each improvising in response to new ideas, reacting to the serendipity of external stimuli, and giving and yielding in roughly equal measure, hopefully to meet somewhere in the middle. This thesis is the result of a long dance, and the music has changed a good deal since I began listening. What follows is therefore neither the thesis I set out to write three years ago, when the Internet was yet to become a pervasive presence in our pockets – to mention just one central change, ontological in its scope and impact – nor necessarily the thesis I would write if I were to start afresh today; rather, it is the story of a journey that began in response to several related and ongoing concerns, each of them centred on what Roger Silverstone describes as the second of the great environmental crises of our times: the crisis in our world of communication (2007, p. v). This thesis is, in large part, a practical and theoretical response to Silverstone's seminal work, *Media and Morality: on the rise of the mediapolis*, which was written shortly before his untimely death. I do not pretend to tread in Silverstone's footsteps, but I live in the world he knew and I share his fascination for the possibility of reciprocity, recognition, and what he describes as 'proper distance' and 'hospitality' in our relationships with mediated Others – the necessary preconditions for a moral life in media.

My response combines theory and creative practice to explore the moral and practical challenge of producing long-form narrative journalism for the Internet, and the role that photography can play in engaging a digitally connected public with nuanced ideas, issues and events. The thesis examines the Internet as a medium in the media

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<sup>1</sup> From Ritchin, Fred (2009) *After Photography*, p.12

ecology tradition to outline and discuss the nature, or logic, of digital communication. That is, if the medium is the message (McLuhan 2003, p.19), what does the Net say to long-form narrative journalism? How can in-depth journalism connect with an attentive audience in a medium where communication tends towards fragmentation, immediacy and truncation (Immordino-Yang, McColl, Damasio & Damasio 2009; Turkle 2011; Zanto & Gazzaley 2009, p. 3065)? This question is posed in the face of an ontological turn: the Internet no longer exists as a medium that we go to – its presence is ubiquitous, penetrating daily life, re-shaping our understanding of private and public spheres, of what it means to be ‘together’ and ‘alone’, and vanishing nevertheless into the fabric of normality precisely because it is so pervasive. Mark Deuze describes this as living *in* media, of living “a media life” (Deuze 2012). In this thesis I argue that digital long-form narrative journalism ought look to the traditions of public art and aesthetic journalism to preserve and reclaim civic cultures within the hybrid public-private, digital-material spaces of a media life, and through this process foster reflexive consideration for the ways in which digital media shapes what we know of each other, as well as how we know it. My concern is for how the mediated stories of Others are produced and received, and the thesis’s rubric therefore begins with journalism, but the ideas and arguments presented are intended to trespass the borderlines of nomenclature to what may otherwise be termed literary journalism, creative non-fiction, reportage, true storytelling, or in many cases simply art. Indeed, my exploration of how we understand one another in and through media – not simply how we communicate in a broad sense, but more specifically the social character of our listening to, and comprehension of, one another – is written for everybody with an interest in the moral temper of our cultural conversation.

‘Aesthetic journalism’ is a term used by Alfredo Cramerotti (2009) to describe and name the tendency within modern art to employ journalistic techniques of investigation and production to create reflexive works of social enquiry that sit provocatively between the fields of art and journalism. As technological change exerts new pressures on the practice and economics of mainstream media industries, Cramerotti observes an opportunity (and a social obligation) for artists to occupy the vast territory of simple reporting that is increasingly left vacant by those who traditionally held the terrain: journalists. As the 24-hour mediascape accelerates away from the likelihood of reflexivity and accountability, art allows for the production of

questions as well as information, and most importantly art provides a vantage point from where journalism's view of the world can be seen. That is, art encourages active, critical inquiry into processes as well as products; it makes communication productively difficult, or – perhaps better stated – it reminds us that meaningful communication *is* difficult (Cramerotti 2009, p.28). In this thesis I argue that the opportunity that Cramerotti observes exists for journalists as well as artists, and that the task is therefore to incorporate aesthetic techniques into the digital reportage of complex issues and ideas, taking the gallery to the newspaper, so to speak, and in the process rethinking both. I argue that digital photo essays provide an important vehicle for digital aesthetic journalism.

Photography is interpreted here literally as 'writing with light', and this includes moving images, unless 'still photograph' is specified. Technology has converged to the extent that documentary photographers can, and are expected to use both still photography and moving image to visually express the story at hand. Most digital cameras and telephones can capture video (literally 'to see', as audio is 'to hear') and still photographs. Many cameras are also capable of producing stop-motion photography, which can create the impression of moving image via continual exposures that are seen in rapid sequence like a cartoon flipbook. In all cases we are writing with light and although the character, logic and aesthetics of moving and still photography vary, in practice the addition of video to the visual repertoire is akin to the addition of a new lens or filter: it is another creative variable. The more important, qualitative change is photography's expansion beyond purely visual representation to a fostering of narratives, based on exposition and evocation and in partnership with audio and the human voice – its interest thereby moving from surfaces to relationships; from a two-dimensional frame to the rich ambiguity of what *cannot* be seen.

This change has both moral and practical dimensions. Everything we know of the world beyond our geographical neighbourhoods we know through the media (Calhoun 1998, p.391; Silverstone 2007). The quality of our media, how it shapes knowledge, discourse and perception, necessarily affects how we live together in a mediated world, shaping our humanity and our inhumanity, our comprehension and miscomprehensions (Silverstone 2007; Strate 2004). The Internet provides an

architectural structure for global connectivity and communication, but technology itself is incapable of producing connection or communication, because these are social processes, not things (Carey 1992; Castells 2009, p.138; Qvortrup 2003, p.258). Thus my concern is for how journalists can work within the logic of digital communication in a manner that retains the social value of rigorous, thoughtful, creative reportage, and for how this intervention may foster an inclination towards meaningful communication with strangers, both distant and near. I argue that meaningful communication on streets and in lounge rooms can foster deep listening online, and vice versa. My thesis considers these questions, and provides a template for ways in which creative journalists can subvert the digital logic of immediacy to communicate journalism slowly, allowing time for thought, reflection, and empathy.

Embodying this argument and template is my primary creative work, *Busking the Silence*, which offers an alternative mode of expression for the ideas and arguments presented here. *Busking the Silence* explores the urban paradox of loneliness in crowded places, and celebrates busking as a public art capable of interrupting the comfort of our habitual isolation, using music as a vehicle for reconnecting us with public spaces. The project, a transmedia documentary for the Internet, radio, academia and public installation, is referred to throughout the thesis, and its production has informed each of the chapters. Indeed, just as *Busking the Silence* is an alternative mode of expression for this thesis, these words and those that follow are also an important, formative component of the project. Each element of the transmedia project is a unique exploration of how we live together in smelly and digital media, and how these two symbolic spheres inform the character of contemporary social life<sup>2</sup>. As vehicles for knowledge production, I consider the creative elements of this thesis to be as valid and important as this scholarly work. Each part enters into conversation with the other parts, absorbing and contributing in ways both implicit and overt, and there is no recommended order for engaging with the thesis's constituent parts, because each is also designed to stand alone. As a further way of integrating theory and practice, written vignettes and images from the digital documentary are presented here, interspersed between the chapters and sections, and

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<sup>2</sup> In this thesis I will argue that cities, streets, buses and other material spaces are also communications media, and – given that digital media are yet to successfully reproduce smell – I use the descriptor, ‘smelly’, to delineate the material sphere from the digital sphere.

the voices of taxi drivers, buskers, students, writers, journalists and artists enter into dialogue with the academic ideas with which this thesis deals. Indeed, my methodology interrogates the relationships and borderlines between journalism, art and academic research, and attempts to enrich and strengthen each angle of the knowledge triangle precisely because it relies on the integrity of the whole.<sup>3</sup>

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Just as a photograph can only be properly read in relation to what lies outside its frame, I would like to further outline what is to follow by briefly referencing what is not here, to retrace the steps of my dance, so to speak. In 2009 I produced an innovative photo essay about forced displacement in Colombia, *theuprooting.com*. Colombia had the largest internally displaced population in the world, and this interactive, bilingual documentary used photography as a platform for exploring the roots beneath the phenomenon, which I came to understand as a massive counter-agrarian reform, and to give voice to ‘the displaced’, as they are known in Colombia, allowing their stories to be told in their own words and voices. I produced *The Uprooting* because it was a story that needed telling, but I produced it the way I did

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<sup>3</sup> A clear example of this productive relationship is apparent in the transcript of the interview I conducted with Dutch media theorist Mark Deuze for the radio component of my creative work. The interview is a rich intersection of ideas and voices, and Mark Deuze has kindly allowed me to publish the transcript in full, which can be seen in Appendix Two of this thesis.

because as a photographer I was aware of photography's limitations, especially in relation to communicating context. I was interested in how digital technology could enhance photography's ability to give voice, and through this voice to explore the intricacies of complex social issues. In this sense, and at a time when historic photographic agencies like *Gamma* were filing for bankruptcy and op-eds in *The New York Times* were lamenting a dying field (Jolly 2009), I could see the possibility that the Internet could reinvigorate photography, 'saving' it from an oft-editorialised deathbed.

I published *The Uprooting* one week before I became a father. Without time or energy for further editorial or promotional work, and despite two awards for human rights reporting,<sup>4</sup> the project quickly began gathering cyber dust; it certainly didn't 'go viral' or create the interest I had hoped. There are several reasons for this, but the most important of them is that *The Uprooting* was too big, and too heavy. The possibilities of interactivity seduced me, blinding me from the challenge of coherent narrative. The testimonies in the project are in turn heart breaking and nauseating<sup>5</sup>, and Colombian journalists, academics, human rights defenders and theologians provide comprehensive backgrounds and explanations for the situation, but the audio files are fragmented and scattered through hours of material, and hidden behind monochrome photography and naïve art. Aesthetically the project has merit, and as an archival work of investigation *The Uprooting* remains valuable – I did hours of listening and I listened well – but as a journalist I failed both my subjects and their audience because the task of hearing and learning was too arduous; digital technology, as I employed it, acted as a barrier to meaningful engagement.

My doctoral research began from the desire to learn from this experience, to understand what had gone wrong and to consider how digital projects about complex social issues could more successfully and meaningfully engage with a digitally connected audience, achieving empathy and understanding through the facilitation of reflection and imagination. This concern has not shifted; but within a short space of time the specifics of my research were inverted. Where I had hoped that the Internet

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<sup>4</sup> Wanda Jamrozik Prize 2010, *Australian Centre for Independent Journalism*; Ossie Award 2010, *Dart Center for Journalism and Trauma*.

<sup>5</sup> *The Uprooting* contains testimonies of systematic abuses including massacre, murder, rape, and child prostitution, amongst other traumas.

might ‘save’ photojournalism, I began to see the possibility that photography’s concision and poetics might serve to galvanise digital long-form narrative journalism more broadly, providing an engaging form for nuanced digital narratives, and a means of moving closer towards ‘proper distance’ in our relationships with mediated Others. Photography, when employed creatively and critically, can provide a platform for communication that sits in a digital middle ground between two opposing forces: truncation, immediacy and efficiency, as embodied in *twitter* on the one hand; and the employment of interactivity and multi-linearity as tools for navigating through infinite publication space on the other – the Internet, unlike books, allows for the publication of 5000-word essay entries in dictionaries of philosophy and local histories, and allows for interactive journalism that employs hypertext to become an ocean without shorelines. What follows is therefore the thesis I wish I had read before producing *The Uprooting*.

The thesis is presented in three parts. Part One, which includes Chapters One, Two and Three, outlines and explains the research methodology and framework, which combine a practice-based approach with media ecology theory and a media life perspective, allowing for a dual focus on communications media as symbolic environments and on material environments as communications media, or what Janet Sternberg describes as the Yin and Yang of media ecology theory (2002, p.3). That is, as digitally connected devices and their associated cultural practices penetrate public places, the social and communicative logics of both spaces, digital and smelly, become mutually constitutive. If we consider how we engage with journalism via a mobile phone, for example, analysis of the engagement’s social character must consider both the nature of the phone itself and the physical setting within which the phone is seen, because both are media that inform the communication taking place. This idea is explored and expanded to understand the ‘logic’ of digital communication, which, together with an outline of the thesis methodology and framework, is the subject of Chapter One.

Chapter Two discusses what the Internet ‘says’ through a cross-disciplinary survey of observable media effects, and through what Ivan Illich describes as the structural paradox of technologies and social institutions, or what he calls ‘tools’ (Illich 1973). This chapter builds on Marshall McLuhan’s theory of media being *extensions of man*,

and considers the social and moral ramifications of the Internet's extension and subsequent numbing of the human central nervous system (McLuhan 2003).

Chapter Three introduces a series of working metaphors for the Internet as a communications medium and considers the 'when', 'where' and 'what' of the Internet. This chapter further illustrates the ways in which the logics of communication in digital and urban spaces mirror and constitute each other, and draws on David Harvey's tripartite framework for analysing space to map, conceptualise and understand the geography of digital space (Harvey 2006). Chapter Three also discusses the nature of power in digital media.

Part Two builds on Part One's study of the symbolic nature of digital media, and its relationship with smelly media, to address questions of agency in media – the 'How?' and 'Why?' of digital aesthetic journalism. That is, given an understanding of the social character of life in digital media, what can be done to foster a cultural inclination towards meaningful communication? Chapter Four begins with the possibility of agency in media ecology scholarship, and asks: if the medium is the message, to what extent can the message influence the shape and social characteristics of the medium? The thesis' working metaphors for digital communication are expanded in Chapter Four, and it is argued that creative journalists should consider digital space in the same way that a curator approaches the creative variables in her gallery or museum, thereby creating something akin to digital galleries in which journalism acts as art. The tradition of literary journalism is surveyed here as a precedent for aesthetic journalism.

Chapter Five focuses on the form, aesthetics and tradition of documentary photography, and argues that the poetics of still photography provide a subversive logic of efficiency in digital media, capable of engaging with a digitally connected public through a combination of exposition and evocation. The historical critiques of documentary photography are considered in relation to the evolving communicative potential of the form, which need no longer be mute, and which therefore has increased scope for the provision of context and narrative. I argue that documentary photography provides an engaging and morally important platform for digital long-form narrative journalism.

Chapter Six concludes the focus on agency in media with an outline of the productive relationship between aesthetic journalism and proper distance. The chapter explores the social agency that emerges from each project, and the ways in which digital photo essays can facilitate this agency, helping to create a culture of listening that enables us to see and hear the silence of mediated Others. An additional focus of Chapter Six is the difficulty of studying, in any empirical way, the cultural reception of media. I argue that aesthetic journalism proves a useful framework for recognising and addressing this dilemma in media studies and journalism studies.

Part Three of the thesis reflects on the challenges and possibilities for a long-form narrative journalism capable of fostering proper distance across the digital and smelly spheres of media life, and these same ideas are applied to communication in the academic field. This final section considers digital culture's challenge to the reading of truth, especially visual truth as it has historically been embodied in the photographic document; the ambiguous meaning of the traditionally descriptive term 'long-form'; and – drawing on Pierre Bourdieu's reflexive sociology, and his theories of 'fields' and 'habitus' in particular – the structural, practical and institutional challenges for building a productive relationship between journalism, art and academic research (Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992; Swartz 1997).

## Part One

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## Chapter One

### The Warp and Weft of Digital Space



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*We no longer describe for the sake of describing, from a caprice and a pleasure of rhetoricians. We consider that man cannot be separated from his surroundings, that he is completed by his clothes, his house, his city, and his country; and hence we shall not note a single phenomenon of his brain and heart without looking for the causes or the consequence in his surroundings.*

**Emil Zola<sup>6</sup>**

*Few new truths have ever won their way against the resistance of established ideas save by being overstated.*

**Isaiah Berlin<sup>7</sup>**

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Liber's name is a contraction of the Spanish word for freedom, *libertad*. He arrived in Sydney one year ago from his native Chile, and since then has busked regularly,

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<sup>6</sup> Originally From *The Experimental Novel*, cited as an epigraph in Collier 1967.

<sup>7</sup> In Heyer 2000, p.97.

playing his accordion in the pedestrian tunnel that runs beneath Sydney's Central Railway Station.

In Chile Liber was also a street musician, but there he performed on the guzzling yellow buses that traverse Santiago's sprawling suburbs, singing to and for a captive audience that was also the subject of his songs, in the tradition of *la canción social*.

In Sydney the dynamic is different. People walk past his music, and few can understand his lyrics. Yet busking is how Liber has found a place in Sydney that feels useful, for nourishing his hunger for social interaction. The expression 'to busk' comes from the Spanish *buscar*, meaning 'to look for', and in Sydney Liber is seeking a way out of isolation, for himself, and the rest of us. His music is a tool of interruption, the opposite of what I sought with my classical guitar ten years ago when I practised on a Chilean park bench. Our meeting feels like the closing of a loosely drawn circle.

We talk about life in Sydney and Santiago and attempt to make sense of the way societies construct meaning through communication, including the communication of shared, consensual silence. When Marshall McLuhan said 'the medium is the message',<sup>8</sup> he wasn't just talking about television, newspapers and radio, but about all things capable of carrying meaning. Songs performed on a bus are not heard the same way as songs in a tunnel, and not just in relation to acoustics, but also in terms of concentration, movement and attentiveness. Beyond the bus and the tunnel are vast urban spaces that shape and mediate our perceptions, conversations, expectations and desires.

Liber says that even friendship feels different in Sydney. "People here get together once every couple of months, and they're friends," he says. "They communicate via Facebook, or on the phone. It's more distant. And it's also because the houses here are bigger. In Chile I spent half my childhood on the streets because there was no room in my home to play, or in my friends' homes. If we wanted to play, it had to be on the street."

Economics, architecture and climate all mediate the way we live together in cities. Modern motorways can be read as metaphors for a society more focused on destinations than journeys; and cars, our dominant medium of transport, as metaphors for privacy, freedom and short-term efficiency. Cities speak in a cacophony of voices, but messages emerge.

Recently I was walking with my wife through a densely populated urban quarter when storm clouds broke and rain began to pour. We took partial refuge under a

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<sup>8</sup> McLuhan 2003

large tree, until a stranger opened the door of his home, offered us each a towel, and invited us inside for coffee and biscuits.

Had we been in Sydney, and not Medellín, I would have been surprised. But, despite its ongoing history of violence, Colombia's 'second city' lends itself to a climate of hospitality. People have time for each other. We are strangers, but we are welcome strangers. Before the equatorial rain began falling we had strolled past innumerable house-front shops selling washing detergent by the cup, cigarettes and eggs individually, and cooking oil by the size of the flask that one arrives with. Such shopping reflects the precariousness of local household economies, but also a spirit of cooperation and intimacy that exists parallel to, and arguably outside of the logic of industrial growth.

Like Liber, I find it hard not to compare Latin American cities with Sydney, to compare poverty with wealth, mountains with beaches, uncertainty with triviality, and a culture of 'come in and have some coffee' with one of isolating efficiency. Liber grew up in a Santiago *barrio*, a word that translates to 'suburb', or 'neighbourhood'. The difference in meaning is subtle, but important. Liber's barrio was a neighbourhood.



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This chapter outlines the thesis methodology and framework, introduces the idea of a *media life* – living *in* rather than *with* media – as an evolving, ontological meta-framework, and briefly discusses where the key ideas and arguments sit within the

diverse academic disciplines that provide the thesis its intellectual setting. These include the fields of journalism studies, media studies, photography, literary journalism studies, sociology and art, amongst other disciplines. To each of these fields the thesis aims to bring a systemic, or network perspective on the moral character of contemporary communication, and, borrowing a term from Manuel Castells, the thesis thus provides a supported hypothesis on the social grammar of the Internet as a communications medium, and, from this hypothesis, outlines modes of social intervention (Castells 2009).

At the core of these modes of intervention is photography. With this in mind, and before outlining the specifics of my methodology, it is worth considering what the methodology is designed to achieve, which, painting with broad brush strokes, is to place photography in its social, moral, physical, professional and theoretical settings. Much of this thesis is not explicitly related to photography at all; however as an object of inquiry it can only be properly understood within the nexus of theory and practice that has provided the thesis its content, form, inspiration and purpose. Everything that follows is the result of a process of cross-fertilisation in which theory and practice are always present, if only implicitly, in a conversation about the social quality and ‘sustainability’ of digital communication, and photography’s place within this media ecology. The economic challenge of creating sustainable revenue streams from online news production creates headlines in both academic journals and the popular press, and provides the fabric for what is generally understood as ‘the crisis in journalism’ (Franklin 2010; Jolly 2009; McChesney 2001; Plagens 2007). A parallel concern, less discussed, is the social sustainability of news production – the challenge of creating informed journalism that is capable of engaging people with contemporary science, art, politics and society in forms that exceed 140 characters, yet retain the concision and poetics of tightly-bound linear narratives (Silverstone 2007). It is arguably only within this fertile middle ground of media space, an imperfect but engaging agora akin to the city square or the Victorian coffee house, that a critical civic culture can be sustained, or revived (Calhoun 1998, p.391; Habermas 1989).

Two points must be made at this stage. The first is to acknowledge that speaking of the Internet in reductive terms is naïve, and likely to incense some readers, which is

not my intention. A year before activists in the Arab Spring employed digital technology to shake the regional status quo, Manuel Castells forecast:

...drops of a steady rain of struggle and sacrifice that ultimately floods the ramparts of oppression, when, and if, the walls of incommunication between parallel solitudes start cracking down, and the audience becomes “we the people” (2009, p.2).

Digital media is capable of stimulating meaningful connections and social change, even from within its characteristic limits of brevity and anonymity. Clearly social networks can amplify calls for action and bring feet to the streets; but from Castells’ forecast we can formulate other questions, especially in relation to who constitutes the ‘we’. How, for example, is news of unrest in North Africa and the Middle East received in a place like Sydney, Australia? What does it mean to a distant people? How is it that information can become imbued with meaning, and thus transformed into communication (Schiller 2007, p.18)? And what characteristics in the medium of communication, in the social setting of reception and in the representation of the information itself will best facilitate meaningful communication between strangers? It is precisely from an interest in the possibility of, and need for widespread social change that this thesis is written. The arguments presented here are premised on the idea that change must be based on kinship, interest and concern for others, both near and distant, and on the possibility that the social inclination towards meaningful communication on a local level might foster the same inclination at the level of mediated communication with distant Others, and vice versa. Deep listening, I contend, is self-reinforcing, just as learning prompts more learning and loneliness so easily fosters habits of reclusion (Bauman 2007; Calhoun 1998; Franklin 2009; McLuhan 2003). To speak of a digital ‘logic’, ‘nature’ or ‘grammar’ is inevitably reductive; however I do not simplify for naivety or to inflame, but rather because all theories simplify and make manageable complex realities (Postman 2004, p.5). Theories allow for the expression of ideas, and although this thesis is, in large part, about the need to respect nuance and complexity in digital communication, narrative is always a dance between the complex and the simple, and flounders in the absence of either.

The second point is to acknowledge that premising this thesis on abstract moral ideals is equally likely to bother some readers. In 1962, Daniel Boorstin traced the recent history of the United States in his book, *The Image: a guide to pseudo-events in*

*America*, in which he argues that ‘the image’ – understood here as superficiality, imitation, connotation and stereotype – began replacing and devaluing ‘ideals’:

[The rise of the image] spelled the distrust, then the decline of ideals. Intellectuals, even more than others, became apologetic for talking or thinking in ideals. It seemed naïve to judge by abstract standards of perfection, rather than by congruence with images (1987, p.201).

Congruence, argued Boorstin, was found in the form of facts, norms, modes, averages and medians, which allowed for the accumulation of new knowledge founded on fact, but alienated from moral judgements that can only exist in the space between facts (ibid). Depth, shallowness, meaning, superficiality, understanding and incomprehension are all relative and relational measures of our mediated world, and are therefore abstract and ultimately *moral*, understood here as existing within a social code that is impervious to empirical measurement, but nevertheless comprehensible through judgements based on first principles (Silverstone 2007, p.7). James Carey observes a comparable gap between the traditional ‘transmission’ view of communication, and what he describes as communication as culture, or ritual:

In a ritual definition, communication is linked to terms such as “sharing,” “participation,” “association,” “fellowship,” and the “possession of a common faith.” This definition exploits the ancient identity and common roots of the terms “commonness,” “communion,” “community,” and “communication.” A ritual view of communication is directed not toward the extension of messages in space but toward the maintenance of society in time; not the act of imparting information but the representation of shared beliefs (1992, p.18).

It is difficult and senseless to measure Beethoven’s *Fifth*, Picasso’s *Guernica*, Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* or Hersey’s *Hiroshima* with the tools of fact, or from within a transmission view of communication, and it is the need to retain a space for meaningful, complex and artful expression in our digital mediascape that motivates this thesis. Roger Silverstone saw this clearly:

The media are too important to be left to the media. This is not soggy liberalism, nor even radical socialism. It is, in a world of polarization, misunderstanding, and in the increasing exploitation of the image and the symbolic spaces of global representation, just plain common sense (2007, p.167).

It is precisely here, in relation to photography, the most obvious and literal representation of society’s predilection for accepting reality as it appears on surfaces and first-readings, that Boorstin’s formula, ‘from ideal to image’, might most readily be inverted. In creating the framework and justification for this abstract ‘might’ I do

not intend to stray from fact, or resort to platitudes where fact falls short, but to use fact as a platform to theorise beyond what is readily known, or, to paraphrase a Latin American folksong, *it is a preference for what may be impossible, because of the possible we already know too much.*<sup>9</sup>

This approach may sound radical, however it is an approach that, even in referencing popular song lyrics, finds a precedent in the work and methodology of Marshall McLuhan, and what he called ‘probes’, by which he meant a prose style that explored rather than explained, exposing critical presuppositions to the open flow of debate and recognising knowledge as a creative process, inviting – or obliging – the reader to participate, if only through disagreement (Gordon 2003, p.4; Wark 2000, p.93).

This methodological approach belongs to media ecology, an evolving intellectual tradition, or metadiscipline (Nystrom in Strate 2004, pp.113-114), which was first named as a field of study in an address by Neil Postman in 1968, though the tradition predates its nomenclature. Postman described the discipline as “the study of media as environments”, explaining that media ecologists are concerned with “how media of communication affect human perception, understanding, feeling and value; and how our interaction with media facilitates or impedes our chances for survival” (Postman 1970, p.161). Whereas most approaches to media studies examine the symbolic content of the media, media ecology is concerned with the ways in which mediums of communication shape information and meaning in particular ways, allowing for the formation of new social patterns and cultures of perception (Ells 2009, p.181).

On the naming of media ecology as a discipline, Postman (2000, pp.10-11) writes:

Our first thinking about the subject was guided by a biological metaphor. You will remember from the time when you first became acquainted with a Petri dish, that a medium was defined as a substance within which a culture grows. If you replace the word “substance” with the word “technology,” the definition would stand as a fundamental principle of media ecology: A medium is a technology within which a culture grows; that is to say, it gives form to a culture’s politics, social organization, and habitual ways of thinking. Beginning with that idea, we invoked still another biological metaphor, that of ecology.... We put the word “media” in the front of the word “ecology” to suggest that we were not simply interested in media, but in the ways in which the interaction between media and human beings gives a culture its character and, one might say, helps a culture to maintain symbolic balance.

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<sup>9</sup> Silvio Rodriguez 1978, ‘Resumen de noticias’ in *Al final de Este Viaje*: “Yo he preferido hablar de cosas imposibles, porque de lo posible se sabe demasiado.”

Media ecology therefore takes as its starting point the idea that culture is a product of all previous and possible communication (Rasmussen 2003, p.458). As a methodology, it is rooted in conceptual and historical analyses of how our media inform what we are able to say about each other, and how we are able to say it, with a particular focus on how the strengths and weaknesses, or 'biases', of different media are manifested in social structures, social consciousness and media content (Zimmer 2005, p.9). Every new medium brings with it new possibilities and constraints for communication, a 'logic', as it were, which structures social discourse in ways that go unnoticed because, like the grammar of a language acquired in infancy, they are seen as natural (Ells 2009, p.181).

Media ecology's most famous maxim – *the medium is the message* – is McLuhan's method of calling on society to examine the hidden grammar of any given medium, and ask what its logic says to the way we live together and make sense of the world.

The methodological approach to determining the logic of a communications medium is open-ended and complex, but grounded in the conviction that a medium's effects manifest themselves materially, and are therefore observable (Ells 2009, p.192). McLuhan studied causes through their effects, and drew his evidence from a rich, cross-disciplinary survey of different fields, including the creative arts, sociology, psychology, linguistics, anthropology, literature, archaeology, classical studies and popular mass media, amongst others (Marshall 2000; Theall 2000; Wark 2000).

McLuhan was an academic polyglot because he knew that the grammar of a language, or medium, most easily becomes transparent in two ways. The first is when a second language is learnt and serves as a point of comparison; the second is when the linguistic boundaries of a grammar are tested, as per the literature of James Joyce, or the paintings of Pablo Picasso. McLuhan therefore studied media through comparisons of how different media affect perception and the structure of meaning, by looking to artists to see how their work expresses new possibilities and concerns for meaning-making, and by shaping his own scholarship into a metaphor-laden cultural practice, "akin to an artist/intellectual" (Marshall 2000, p.31; Strate 2004; Theall 2000; Wark 2000).

The importance of metaphor is more than rhetorical. When McLuhan said that the medium is the message, he was deliberately overstepping the mark, because his metaphor, and our understanding of it, becomes the mark, thus extending the terms of reference and allowing room for intellectual discussion to grow (Levinson 1999, p.28). Media influence what we know, but they are also responsible for how we *think about* what we know. This is what Neil Postman meant when he tempered McLuhan's aphorism to say "our media are our metaphors" (1987, p.15). Following McLuhan's method, and reiterating it here in a speech on the blessings and curses of 'the information age', Postman says:

I think we need to consult our poets, playwrights, artists, humorists, journalists, theologians, and philosophers, who alone are capable of creating or restoring those metaphors or stories which give point to our labors, give meaning to our history, elucidate the present, and give direction to the future (2004, p.4).

My method follows this tradition, surveying empirical evidence and creative practice to inform metaphorical understandings of the Internet's logic, and what it means for long-form narrative journalism and the photographic form that may successfully extend its significance in our mediated world. Metaphors are never literally true, but they only work if they depict something that is culturally recognisable as true. Time does not have feathers, wings or a propeller, for example, yet we understand the expression, 'time flies'.

In addition to media ecology's open-systems (polyglot) and practice-led approaches, Janet Sternberg (2002) proposes an additional method for understanding the nature of media. Sternberg's third method involves combining media ecology's two intellectual traditions, the study of media as environments, which focuses on *intrapersonal* communication, and the study of environments as media, which focuses on *interpersonal* communication and the ways that physical environments mediate communication (Sternberg 2002, p.3; Strate 2004). Sternberg describes these two approaches as the Yin and Yang of media ecology, and she argues that this metaphor of balance and complementarity should inform an integrated approach to media ecology research.

As a medium, the Internet lends itself to an integrated approach. As a mass media, the Net can be conceived of as a landscape with contours that involve our senses, shape our perception and structure our understanding in particular ways (Carr 2010;

Levinson 1999). And the Net's mobile ubiquity infiltrates and mediates our experience of the world in ways that redefine what it means to be alone, together, distant and close, with repercussions for how we understand the public and private spheres of social life (Deuze 2011; Franklin 2009; Turkle 2011). McLuhan (2003) and Postman (1987) argue that the logic of a dominant medium not only shapes communication within that medium, but throughout society more generally. That is, the way we communicate online will inform how we communicate offline. Any study of interpersonal communication in an urban environment must therefore consider how digital media reconfigures the ways in which we see, hear and understand one another in smelly space; and analysis of what the Internet 'says' as a communications medium must consider how the Net affects social behaviour beyond digital space, or – better stated – in the evolving spaces where digital and smelly media overlap: the spaces of *a media life*.

Two decades ago, James Carey argued that communication, interpreted broadly to include mathematical, scientific and artistic expression, should be understood as the primary phenomena of experience, rather than as a lesser artefact derived from a 'realer' nature (1992, p.26). New media theorist Scott Lash expands on this notion to describe the increasing shift towards lifestyles and environments in which information and media have become formative ingredients as, "a new new media ontology" (in Beer 2009, p.987). Lash is one of several media theorists to recognise that information technologies now 'comprise', or 'constitute', our lives, both individually and collectively, mediating experience as well as data, and therefore actively (re)shaping how we understand the world and our place within it (Beer 2009; Burrows 2009; Deuze 2012; Silverstone 2007). Silverstone writes:

The media are becoming environmental. Not in the Baudrillardian sense of the media as generating a distinct sphere, a separation of the symbolic from the realities of everyday life, a kind of more or less escapist excursion into the realm of fantasy and simulation. More a sense of the media as tightly and dialectically intertwined with the everyday. We have become dependent on the media for the conduct of everyday life. They have become the *sine qua non* of the quotidian (2007, p.5).

Mark Deuze's term, 'media life', is based precisely on media's quotidian ubiquity. We no longer live *with*, but *in* media, Deuze argues; media cannot be placed outside our realm of experience, but are intrinsic to it (Deuze 2011, pp.137-138). Like Lash, Deuze consequently argues that we have reached an ontological turn in which the

greatest challenge in 21<sup>st</sup>-century communication and media studies will be the disappearance of media (Deuze 2011, p.137). In addition to the invisibility of media – an idea I will return to shortly – the ontological turn that the media life perspective represents (a change from living *with* media, to living *in* media) can be understood and observed in a number of ways. The first is that mediation can no longer be understood in epistemological terms, because media precondition the very possibility of knowledge (in Sutherland 2014, pp.113-114). In a media life, we cannot study media, nor communicate knowledge or understanding of media, without already employing media – an inescapable feedback loop of life, and study, *in* media (ibid). A second important observation is that, according to Deuze, we can no longer think about being alone or together, or in public or private space, in the same ways that we traditionally have. In media we are alone *and* together at the same time, all the time (Deuze 2014, pers. comm. 22 April); however living *in* media is first and foremost a rhetorical tool that, like McLuhan’s maxim, intentionally oversteps the mark in order to draw our attention to a new set of conditions that remediate life as it has always been lived. The fundamentals of life are the same, and these are built around relationships. It is the relationships between people, between people and media, and between people *in* media that provide this thesis its framework.

At first glance, the idea of media becoming increasingly invisible is counterintuitive, and when I discuss the idea with undergraduate students at the University of Technology, Sydney, and the University of Wollongong, they are quick to challenge the idea with anecdotes that illustrate a critical awareness of media. For example, new social protocols in cafes and restaurants are developing, my students tell me, whereby a group of friends will place their mobile phones in a pile on the table, and the first person to look at their phone must pay the group’s bill: a clear and critical social response to digital media’s disruptive, fragmenting and ubiquitous presence.

But as a normative framework for investigating media’s place and role within contemporary society, Deuze’s *media life* is important, and sits logically within media ecology’s tradition of metaphor-led enquiry. A fish knows exactly nothing about water because it has no experience of dry, remarked McLuhan, and one of his central, if less-commented upon observations is that media extend our senses and our bodies, and in so doing become invisible to us, displacing, or ‘amputating’ the parts of

ourselves that they replace – something that will be explored in greater detail in Chapter Two (McLuhan 2003).

Furthermore, although my students' challenge to the invisibility of media illustrates an awareness of change, media ecology has never focused on specific instances of change, but the nature of change itself (Meyrowitz 2001, p.15). And beyond the common observation that the most common aspects of life are those most readily overlooked (Carey 1992, p.24), it is nevertheless true that the underlying mechanics of the digitally networked world are entirely, and literally, invisible to us. Writing in *Wired*, and using the self-driving car as an example of how our technologies shape and influence our lives, Clive Thompson references a disturbing scenario, originally formulated by neuroscientist Gary Marcus:

Your car is on a narrow bridge when a school bus veers into your lane. Should your self-driving car plunge off the bridge—sacrificing your life to save those of the children? Obviously, you won't make the call. You've ceded that decision to the car's algorithms. You better hope that you agree with its choice (in Thompson 2013).

Scenarios like this illustrate a wider body of studies into the ways in which our devolution of decision-making processes to information technologies is 'producing' everyday life in ways that are both invisible to us and beyond our direct control, because most of the world's 'communication' – better understood, I think, as information transmission (Carey 1992, p.18) – is conducted between machines in the form of complex algorithms (Beer 2009, p.988; Hayles 2006, p.161; Thrift 2005).

Our media life, or what Silverstone describes as our mediated world, can thus be approached from many angles, and much of the current research and thinking is concerned with its impacts on political economy and power, which I will address in Chapter Three (Beer 2009; Thrift 2005); however my primary concern in this thesis is how we approach Others, and how Others can approach us, within the world of representation that could not exist in the absence of the ubiquitous media that extend our everyday life beyond the natural limits of our bodily senses, and – importantly – how the expansion of constant communicative possibility re-shapes the ways in which we approach each other in the absolute geographical spaces of daily life. How, I ask, might our habits of communication foster a cultural inclination towards what Roger Silverstone describes as 'hospitality' and 'proper distance' with those we meet on

screens and streets (Silverstone 2007)? In practice, this is a reformulation and redirecting of Sternberg's Yin and Yang of media ecology, and as a probe it sits at the centre of my creative work, *Busking the Silence*.



In its form and content, *Busking the Silence* is a metaphor for the hyper-interconnectedness of digital–urban spaces, and a parallel, mimetic expression of this thesis. Methodologically the work has multiple tasks, the simplest of which is the provision of quantitative data – an unintended product of the project's design.

The content of *Busking the Silence* has been crafted into several media products, for multiple platforms and audiences, however at its heart is an audio-visual recreation of a mundane urban space – Sydney's Devonshire Street tunnel – which stretches 120 metres beneath the city's Central Railway Station, connecting thousands of daily commuters and tourists with their destinations. Filled with the violent light of fluorescent bulbs and the music of buskers performing for the passing crowd, the tunnel is a microcosm of contemporary urban life: multicultural, vivid and hurried; at once a place and a conduit; visceral and banal; public and private.

Five independent but visually connected frames feature and introduce the project's six main characters: four buskers, one in each of the first four frames; me – the author – sitting in the tunnel with a cardboard placard that says 'epilogue', occupying the fifth frame; and the main character – the anonymous individual, passing and passing across the five frames, between the camera and the buskers, enjoying the urban freedom of not being seen (Tonkiss 2003).

The discrete, recorded observation of people passing through a banal space provides 50 minutes of randomised data illustrating contemporary use of digital media. How many people are looking at a phone whilst walking between the camera and the musician? How many are wearing earphones? That is, how many people are in some way fragmenting their awareness and concentration across multiple media? This

quantitative data is available in Appendix One; however, for the project's design, aims and methodology, the answer is of less significance than the question.

A fundamental purpose of art is to “make the phenomenon strange” – to breathe curiosity into the stale air surrounding what is *normal*, thus helping McLuhan's metaphorical fish see water (Carey 1992, p.24). *Busking the Silence* draws on the traditions of video art, literary journalism and installation art to create a digital documentary in which interactivity is not merely a tool, but an integral part of the message itself (Ran 2005, p.3). Its aim is to engage meaningfully with a digitally connected public, sharing stories and ideas that speak to our human condition, and, via this engagement, provoke awareness of how our use of media and our presence within them influences our relationships with Others. This can only work through critical engagement with the documentary's form, as well as its content. That is, if the Devonshire Street tunnel is recognised as a mediating space, then the bus, home, shopping centre or office in which one views the documentary may also be recognised as a mediating space, in addition to the computer, phone or tablet with which one sees, hears and interacts with the documentary.

As a digital installation, *Busking the Silence* makes clear that in perceiving the documentary the viewer occupies a space within it, and that this space coexists with what is being perceived (Ran 2005, p.9). Each of the buskers is performing in his or her frame, and the viewer can scroll along the length of the tunnel, looking at each of them. However only the ambient noise of the tunnel is heard, unless the viewer interacts with a musician, scrolling over his or her frame (or tapping the screen in the case of mobile devices), in which case two things happen: the busker's music is heard, and a corner of the screen folds up to indicate a second layer beneath. This simple interaction reflects a daily choice that commuters face in the tunnel: will I stop to listen, perhaps removing my headphones or re-placing my phone in my pocket, or will I continue moving?

The second layer, accessed via a mouse-click or second screen-tap, is a first-person narrative photo-essay in which the busker discusses his or her experience of the city, busking, community, friendship, and music. Liber Osorio, a Chilean/Mapuche piano-accordionist discusses alienation, activism, and the challenge of having a voice far from home; New York-based violinist Alexander Sovronsky discusses the differences

between busking and stage performance; Maori singer/guitarist Rich Noho speaks on music, memory, and homelessness; and Markela Panegyros speaks on attentiveness. Behind the fifth video of me in the tunnel is a photo-essay that explicitly explores the urban paradox of loneliness in crowded places, our connection to things and our parallel disconnection from each other.

*Busking the Silence* thus provides an illustrative function, in which theories linking the fields of journalism and art materialise, and in which photography's subversive logic of efficiency is manifest – an idea that is discussed in Part Two of this thesis. Additionally, the project is also an essay in form, asking how a digital documentary can respond to the double challenge of meaningful engagement and a critical awareness of this same engagement (Cramerotti 2009). The project also explores the grammatical limits and limitations of digital literary journalism's audio-visual turn, comparing the scope and mechanics of audio-visual expression with the spatiotemporal agility of the written word. It is, thus, a contribution to critical innovation in digital journalism.

In the chapters that follow some additional frameworks and theories are introduced, including David Harvey's tripartite framework for understanding and conceptualising space (2006); and Pierre Bourdieu's reflexive framework of field and habitus, which I use to place *Busking the Silence* in its professional setting, and to explore the conflicts, both potential and actual, that the project creates (Bourdieu 2005; Swartz 1997).

The next two chapters discuss the 'what', 'where' and 'when' of digital media – a theoretical and metaphorical exploration of the media that most shape our contemporary communication in the warp and weft of digital space.

## Chapter Two

There is Another World, and it is This One.

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Outside a suburban café a man sips a black coffee and rhythmically pushes a stroller that he has placed on the pavement between our tables. Two tiny feet in yellow slippers lie motionless in the stroller, protruding from beneath a dark cloth. The man lifts the coffee to his mouth and smiles, eyes closed, relaxed. Tiredness hangs from his face like ripe fruit on a generous tree. His posture is bent with its weight.

From the adjacent road a polished four-wheel-drive demands our attention, its engine revving as it is forced to slow behind a cyclist. The driver honks her horn, once, twice, three times, and beneath the shade cloth the little yellow slippers begin to move. The man watches his daughter's feet, then looks to the sky with an expression of disbelief as she begins to cry.

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The late Polish journalist Ryszard Kapuscinski noted that a novel could never be written about a crowd. The multitude is too fickle a subject for any sustained narrative, and its means of communication too limited: the strike, the rally, the barricades, or the nervous silence of a society forced into reciprocal distrust under the tyranny of an assiduous dictator. Kapuscinski's observation came from one of so many places where people disappear for saying the wrong thing to the wrong person; a place where, consequently, nobody says a thing, to anybody. The solitudes of Sydney are less pathological, more practical. We maintain a convenient indifference to each other, an indifference that allows for anonymity and for freedom of expression. There is no style of hair, makeup or dress that cannot go uncommented on in Sydney. "On any person who desires such queer prizes," E.B White once wrote, the city "will bestow the gift of loneliness and the gift of privacy."<sup>10</sup> In Sydney we enjoy the unique urban freedom to be looked past; we are liberated from the attention of others. We are liberated from each other.

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*And if one day people believe neither the validation of the photograph nor the eyewitness testimony, then we will live self-absorbed in a world where there are no massacres, at least no credible ones.*

**Fred Ritchin<sup>11</sup>**

*The future belongs to crowds.*

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<sup>10</sup> In Tonkiss 2003, p.298.

<sup>11</sup> Ritchin 2009, p.47

As I begin writing this chapter Australia's newly elected Prime Minister, Tony Abbott, is announcing the dissolution of Australia's Climate Commission, a federally funded body tasked with engaging the public with the science of climate change through community forums and independent investigations. The commission's dismantling was not unexpected; however it illustrates a paradox that is, I think, the most troubling aspect of a life lived *in* rather than *with* media. It is this paradox that provides the canvas for this, the first of two chapters exploring the grammar, or 'nature' of digital communication.

The Internet is a convergence and remediation of every preceding communications medium. It generates new patterns in the production and dissemination of culture, and permeates all spheres of communication, from private to public, professional to recreational, instrumental to inspirational (Calhoun 1998, p.373; Castells 2009, p.64; Levinson 1999). To speak of its nature as a communications medium is therefore difficult; but the task is made easier precisely because the Net is so pervasive. The Internet's effects, when looked for, are difficult to *not* see (Castells 2009, p.64). This chapter could therefore be a thesis in itself – it probably should be – however here its role is to illustrate the changing character of our cultural conversation, and explore how the nature of digitally mediated communication can be read in the questions that emerge from these changes.

How is it, then, that a people with unprecedented access to information elect as their leader a man who once described the science of climate change as “absolute crap”? This is not a political question, or at least my concern here is not directly political; it is fundamentally a moral question. In substance, the question could equally be posed in relation to how unprecedented social connectivity correlates with an epidemic of loneliness (Bauman 2007; Coget, Yamauchi & Suman 2002; Franklin 2009; Turkle 2011); or how the Internet's infinite space lends itself to communication that is most readily characterised by truncation and fragmentation (Carr 2010; Radovan 2001; Turkle 2011)? Each of these questions illustrates aspects of the same paradox, which,

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<sup>12</sup> DeLillo 1991, p.16

in turn, provides a key to understanding society and culture vis-à-vis digital communications technology, and vice versa. This is not to say that technology is a direct *cause* of loneliness, fragmentation, ignorance or short sighted political decision making; rather, it is a study of relationships and correlations, and follows McLuhan's method of observing media effects to better understand a medium's underlying logic, or what 'it says' to society (McLuhan 2003).

From the previous chapter we take, and continue with the idea that a society's culture is composed of what its members are able to express to one another, because it is from our communication that collective knowledge, institutions, customs and wisdom emerge (Rasmussen 2003, p.458). The Internet extends an individual's voice and mind to the extent that we can now say anything to anybody, all the time, at least within a transmissions' view of communication (Carey 1992); yet the sheer volume of available information in our mediated world has led to the inflation – and hence the devaluation – of information itself, and despite unprecedented connectivity at a technical level, the political ascendancy of climate change denial-ism is a powerful indicator of the social disconnect between observation-based knowledge and the ability to assimilate and employ this knowledge in a constructive manner (Bauman & Donskis 2013; Hamilton 2013).

I begin this chapter with reference to climate change because denial-ism's success signals a failure in communication between the humanities and the natural sciences (Bauman et al. 2013, p.164; Hamilton 2013), and because this grave failure lies at the intersection of two spheres of our mediated world: the natural and the symbolic, or what in this thesis I will most often describe as the smelly and digital spheres. If media constitute our daily experience of the world, and the biosphere is now a product of human action, as the science of anthropogenic climate change indicates, it follows that sustainable stewardship of the planet requires deliberate care of both the symbolic and natural spheres of our existence (Silverstone 2007). That observation-based knowledge has been recast as belief is thus of as much ecological concern as ocean acidification or Australia's unprecedented heat waves throughout 2013. And herein lies the paradox, as the Internet has exacerbated problems that it was designed to solve (Bauman et al. 2013; Hamilton 2013).

In the decades preceding the Internet, network engineers and programmers were motivated to solve two related questions: “How is contingent communication among different people, strangers and over distance, possible in a complex world? And what in communication triggers further communication (Rasmussen 2003, p.457)?” The Internet is less an invention than an evolved response to these questions. Contingent communication between strangers is now technologically possible to the extent that random, infinite connections have come to define what is possible and thus what is considered normal, and on an instrumental level the programmers’ questions have therefore been answered and resolved (Bauman 2007, p.3). Indeed, an essential aspect of what sociologist Zygmunt Bauman describes as “liquid modernity” is the penetration of digital logic into our cultural fabric. Describing liquid modernity – which is treated in more detail shortly – Bauman writes:

Society is increasingly viewed and treated as a ‘network’ rather than a ‘structure’ (let alone a solid ‘totality’): it is perceived and treated as a matrix of random connections and disconnections and of an essentially infinite volume of possible permutations (ibid).

The technical possibility of connection ad infinitum has, however, made the programmers’ questions all the more important when considered in their cultural context. How, with such an extraordinary tool, can we facilitate meaningful communication between strangers in a complex world?

The relationship between the technical potential of technologies, or what Ivan Illich describes as ‘tools’, and the actual effect of any given tool in society is a common thread connecting the work of Ivan Illich with that of Marshall McLuhan. For Illich, a tool is any technology or institution that encapsulates a new body of knowledge, expressed or organised to solve a clearly stated problem (1973, pp.20-21). At first this problem is solved, or demonstrably improved, writes Illich, however the improvement is then employed as a way of measuring society against the technology’s own achievements and logic. Illich describes this phenomenon as technology’s ‘second threshold’, and he provides the example of the car:

In the case of transportation it has taken almost a century to pass from an era served by motorised vehicles to the era in which society has been reduced to virtual enslavement to the car (1973, p.7).

At first glance this statement appears another case of overstepping the mark in order to express an important idea. However, when I mentioned the remark to a colleague whose doctoral research investigates sustainable urban planning, he insisted that the idea hits a very big nail exactly on the head. Cars, like horse-drawn carts before them, are designed to make the human body more efficient, allowing us to travel greater distances in less time. That is the fundamental purpose of the car, and it is a purpose achieved (McLuhan 2003, pp.293-301). However, in modern cities, the car has not decreased travel times, or – better stated – the car has dictated an approach to thinking and planning that increases the distances that people must travel to reach their destinations (Shoup 2005). Urban sprawl is a direct response to, and product of the car's centrality to our daily life, and it dictates a form of social organisation that decreases social efficiency and social connectivity whilst simultaneously imposing the car's model of efficiency on the design and location of social institutions such as schools, hospitals, churches, shopping centres and other community hubs (Shoup 2005; McLuhan 2003, p.300). Parking spaces, for example, are written into the planning of new city buildings, and everybody must subsequently pay for 'free parking' through the prices of restaurant meals, theatre tickets, supermarket groceries and gym memberships, all of which are inflated to cover the initial costs associated with providing parking (Shoup 2005, p.2). Bicycles, public transport and even walking could all be more efficient and socially sustainable modes of transport in modern cities, but only if we were to organise ourselves in ways that do not necessitate the use of cars (Shoup 2005).

As a case study, the car also illustrates how a tool shapes social communication. Imagine, for example, waiting in queue for a train ticket or bank teller, and upon seeing that the person in front of you has failed to progress with the queue, pulling an air-horn from your pocket and blasting it into their ear: [...;HONK!...] The scenario is absurd, and would not be tolerated in any civil context; however it illustrates the ways in which a medium limits and shapes our expression, in this case confining our social grammar to hand gestures and the exclamation marks on steering wheels.

In his work comparing and outlining the logic of television and the printed word, and by way of outlining this same idea, Neil Postman writes that it is unreasonable to expect philosophical argument to be conducted through smoke signals:

Puffs of smoke are insufficiently complex to express ideas on the nature of existence, and even if they were not, a Cherokee philosopher would run short of either wood or blankets before he reached his second axiom. You cannot use smoke to do philosophy. Its form excludes the content (1987, p.7).

The grammar of digital communication provides a limitation that is exactly opposite to that of smoke: its form is so inclusive that all communication is equally reduced to the ones and zeros of binary code, and this reduction is not something that is lived *with*, but *in*, constituting the mood and scope of our cultural conversation. The gravity of this ontological shift is clear when one explores McLuhan's work on media as environments that extend the human body whilst simultaneously 'amputating' or making numb that part of the body that is extended (2003, p.8). For McLuhan (2003), a medium is any extension of the human body. Clothing is a medium because it extends our skin; a home is a medium because it extends the body's ability to regulate heat; the calculator a medium because it extends the mind's ability for mathematical computations; and the bicycle, shoe, stirrup and car because each is an extension of the human foot. Each of these media redefines and amplifies the natural functions of the human body, but their extensions also distance us from direct experience, thus exerting a numbing effect on that part of the body that is extended (McLuhan 2003). The linguistic root of 'media' comes, after all, from the Latin for 'middle layer' – that which sits between us and the world (Parisier 2011, p.60). McLuhan's understanding of media thus concurs with Illich that where the car's impact on society begins as an extension of the foot for the sake of efficient movement through space, it ends with a new cultural logic whereby cars rather than people populate cities, pedestrians become "second-class citizens", and feet are made redundant, or "amputated" (2003, p.300). The motorcar, writes McLuhan:

...separated work and domicile, as never before. It exploded each city into a dozen suburbs, and then extended many of the forms of urban life along the highways until the open road seemed to become non-stop cities. It created the asphalt jungles, and caused 40,000 square miles of green and pleasant land to be cemented over... The motorcar ended the countryside and substituted a new landscape in which the car was a sort of steeplechaser. At the same time, the motor destroyed the city as a casual environment in which families could be reared. Streets, and even sidewalks, became too intense a scene for the casual interplay of growing up. As the city filled with mobile strangers, even next door neighbors became strangers (ibid).

This, says McLuhan, is the story of the motorcar. It is what 'it says' to society. The car's content is an amplification of the human foot – the medium that it extends and remediates – but its message is the remapping of urban social life. Every new medium

exerts changes on our experience of the world and of each other (McLuhan 2003). These changes are seen socially, however change itself occurs primarily at the level of individual perception, hence McLuhan's focus on the human body. In the introduction to the first edition of *Understanding Media* in 1964, McLuhan writes:

During the mechanical ages we had extended our bodies in space. Today, after more than a century of electric technology, we have extended our central nervous system itself in a global embrace, abolishing both space and time as far as our planet is concerned (2003, p.5).

Whilst suggestive of McLuhan's technological optimism, this statement also prefigures the observations made in more recent decades by James Carey (1992), Roger Silverstone (2007), and Mark Deuze (2011), et al., that in extending our primary and most complex tool of perception – the human nervous system – the media have become environmental. And, more importantly, it is now possible to build on McLuhan's understanding of media by asking what the extension and subsequent amputation of our central nervous system means for society and culture in a mediated world. As a metaphor, this amputation is another way of expressing, or explaining in a systematic way, the paradox of a Prime Minister's publicly accepted denial of science in a world of information abundance, and restates Illich's principle of a technology's second threshold.

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So what does it mean to lose – or blunt – our central nervous system? Individually, and on a biological level, our touch, dexterity, sight, smell, taste and hearing remain functionally unchanged; however there is another vital perception that has been

atrophied, and its depletion provides the subject of Zygmunt Bauman's latest book exploring the moral character of social life in liquid modernity, co-written in dialogue form with Lithuanian philosopher Leonidas Donskis.

The book, *Moral Blindness* (2013), builds on Bauman's idea that social meaning and cohesion are no longer derived from sturdy, predictable entities such as nation states, which historically have provided the ground on which our individual and collective actions find their necessary opposing force, thus allowing society to stand and move in relation to something still and solid (Bauman 2000; Bauman et al. 2013). In the digital age, the bonds that kept modernity in its solid state have dissolved or evaporated under the pressure of values associated with the market economy, individualism, consumerism, and an obsession for the perpetual motion of a fleeting present, hence a transition to a new, 'liquid' phase of modernity (Bauman 2000). What Bauman describes as 'liquid' can, I think, equally be expressed as 'digital' without altering the substance of his ideas, which are largely formulated around the transition from communities to networks, and on the shifts in the strength, duration, order and cohesiveness of social bonds that distinguish the former from the latter (Bauman et al. 2013, p.15).

In studying the sociology of liquid modernity, therefore, Bauman paints the nature of relationships in a media life, and he delineates as clearly as any other current thinker the nature of digital communication. The amputation, or 'insensitivity' that Bauman and Donskis identify as characteristic of liquid modernity is the loss of a "sense of belonging" – to a public, to a civic culture, or to some collective that is coherent enough to give meaning and purpose to individual action and thought. Writes Bauman:

With moral pain smothered before it becomes truly vexing and worrying, the web of human bonds woven of moral yarn becomes increasingly frail and fragile falling apart at the seams. With citizens trained to search for salvation from their troubles and a solution to their problems in consumer markets, politics may (or is prompted, pushed and ultimately coerced to) interpellate its subjects as consumers first and citizens a distant second; and redefine consumer zeal as citizen virtue, and consumer activity as the fulfilment of a citizen's primary duty... (Bauman et al. 2013, p.12, suspension points in original).

For Bauman and Donskis, the 'amputation' of our central nervous system is not a loss of direct sensation, but is experienced as isolation from the relationships with

strangers that give meaning to life *beyond* one's own body and one's own possessions. In this vision, digital media act like a metropolis in which large numbers of people are drawn together into a common space, each with similar capacities to connect, disconnect and shun as they wish. And, as is the case in large cities, the intuitive response to a life lived alongside so many Others is to withdraw into "ghettos of the familiar", into places where one can protect herself as much as possible from the difficulties of mutual interest and understanding (Calhoun 1998, pp.388). Lost in this rubric of ghettoization, writes Calhoun (ibid), are the processes of individual and cultural growth that blossom from encounters with the unknown, and the awareness that, as Leonidas Donskis puts it, "human beings are incomplete without one another" (Bauman et al. 2013, p.165). When consistently applied, the withdrawal into a realm of insensitivity amounts to a moral failure that Bauman and Donskis call an *adiaphoron*, a term they borrow from the Greek, originally meaning 'an unimportant thing', but used here to describe the ability to withdraw into inaction and insensitivity vis-à-vis instances of injustice (Bauman et al. 2013, p.37). Donskis writes:

You consider the adiaphorization of behaviour to be one of the most sensitive problems of our epoch. Its causes are manifold: instrumental rationality; mass society and mass culture, that is, being in a crowd each and every moment (just think of television and the Internet); having the crowd in one's soul; and a conception of the world such that it seems you are always enveloped by an anonymous power thanks to which no one will recognize, identify or shame you. Thus those things that we ourselves do not connect with our lives become of no importance to us; their existence is dissociated from our being in the world; and they do not belong to the sphere of our identity and self-conception. Something happens to others, but not to us. ...These 'others' are fictions created by artists, analysts, scholars or journalists. Real is only what happens to me. What happens to me physically and directly. What can be proven (2013, pp. 38-39).

This passage says much to the character of liquid modernity, and to the degradation of knowledge to the status of belief – something optional, a choice to be bought into; but of foremost importance here, I think, is Donskis' phrase, *To have the crowd in one's soul*, which is as close a description of a life lived *in* media as one might find, and – indeed – it arguably carries the idea a notch further: here we have a life lived *for* media, an idea that tempers any notion that Deuze's theory of a media life is overstated.

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Earlier this year my mother celebrated an important birthday. At six in the evening on the day of her birthday she had received phone calls from several family members, but the lack of calls from friends began to sadden her. Looking for connection she logged onto Facebook where she found many of the birthday messages that might otherwise have been phone conversations. My mother's sadness, however, was undiminished. The Facebook messages were an inferior substitute for the voices of friends. They were too easy.

There is nothing remarkable in this story; however, when I shared it with an undergraduate media studies class as a way of discussing 'the media is the message', one of my students raised her hand to say she had, "the exact opposite story". Her 16 year-old brother had recently received a thoughtful email on his birthday, in which a friend praised him at length and told him how much he valued his friendship. My student's brother gratefully responded to the email, but asked his friend to please re-send the message via Facebook so that others could see it.

This story sits within the new ontology of our mediated world, a simple renovation of Descartes' *Cogito*: I am seen, therefore I am; and the more I am seen, the more I am (Bauman et al. 2013, p.28). One of the first artists to embody this ontological shift in his work was Don DeLillo, whose literature scaffolds Marshall McLuhan's argument that artists are uniquely placed to see media logic, and – through the expression and

exploration of media logic in their work – help the rest of us grapple with it. For DeLillo (1991, p.89), the individual is a universe unto herself, self-contained, and thus to society little more than a functional unit. She has learnt to see others as if from Space, through the lens of a satellite, from a vantage point where gender and features don't matter, every other person the same, all the time: a mobile dot. The world is smaller, we say, because our nervous system is bigger, extending across every mapped space, but we observe those closest to us, those who share our offices, trains and lounge rooms, through the same long-distance prism that shapes our communication with the people who constitute our fragile social networks (Bauman et al. 2013, p.11; DeLillo 1991).

In Bauman's work on liquid modernity, the 'long-distance prism' is explained in the assertion, above, that an ethic of consumerism has replaced our civic gaze, consumerist zeal constituting a new civic virtue, and our curated appearance to Others based largely on relationships to *things* (Baudrillard 2001, pp.16-17; Bauman et al. 2013, p.12). In his seminal theory of *simulacra*, Jean Baudrillard – like Bauman – describes the substitution of difficult, multifaceted human relationships with 'personalized' relations to objects. For Baudrillard, consumerism becomes an interaction between the personality of the consumer and the "personality" of the product (Baudrillard 2001, p.17). Within this logic, the act of consumption is endowed with the same moral value as any human relationship. We come to define ourselves in and through a community of things, and this shift leads us to simultaneously reduce each other to the level of products, for which our appetite, says Bauman, is extinguished as soon as a superficial blemish diminishes the products' promise of enjoyment, or something else is offered to sustain and gratify our perpetual desire for the new (Baudrillard 2001, p.17; Bauman et al. 2013, p.147). The brittle crowd on city streets is thus composed of bags, jeans, friends, glasses, men, cars, earphones, women, umbrellas, grandparents, phones, babies, shoes, children, earrings, laughter and books.

And who in such a strange crowd is heard, or seen? *Recoil*, an art installation by the Danish art collective Oncotype, explores this question. It presents a movie with random statistics about contemporary life, which is projected onto a screen, unless the observer/participant shouts into a microphone in the middle of the room, an act that

prompts one person's story to replace the rolling statistics. To hear the story, one must shout, but by shouting it is impossible to hear the story (Qvortrup 2003, p.257).

Our mediated world is filled with extraneous noise that demands of each act of communication that it become louder, more crass and more sensational in order to be noticed (Bauman et al. 2013, p.38; Ritchin 2009, p.139). This is an old concern in the face of snowballing information (Postman 2004, p.3); however eight years ago journalism students were still taught that the fifth page of a newspaper was a good place to publish news of public interest and concern.<sup>13</sup> It was a reference point, still in relation to the pages around it, each of which played a role in an informational schema that was imperfect, but nevertheless useful and considered. The 'digital fifth page' has dissipated into the ether.

What we do have is contacts. My audience is my friends' friends, and the information I receive is filtered through them (Shirky 2008). This is arguably a more useful, dynamic and exciting way of delivering and sharing news and entertainment than anything a newspaper or broadcaster can provide, but it is a change in nature as well as form; it is the crowd in us and us for the crowd, and in both instances the 'public' is marginalised from the conversation (Bauman et al. 2013). Engagement with the unknown is a more difficult social exercise than the maintenance of a community carried within, and for this reason the crowd in our soul is not an equivalent substitute for the *solidarities* of more solid times, the latter bearing the weight of social bonds that exist beyond the technological logic of connections and disconnections (Bauman et al. 2013). The conflation of social networks with communities is an expression of Bauman and Donskis' loss of belonging and subsequent adiaphora, the amputation of our central nervous system in a digitally mediated world.

And so we return to the paradox upon which this chapter sits – the space between a tool's stated intentions and its actual effects, between the wish to facilitate contingent communication among different people, strangers and over distance, in an increasingly complex world, and a strange loss of belonging in the midst of hyperconnection; that is, between the extensions and amputations of digital media, of which there exist sufficient number to do justice to the complexity of our central

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<sup>13</sup> I base this assertion on my own experience as an undergraduate journalism student in the period 2006-2008.

nervous system. And not all is gloom, as surely we all know. The Internet delivers opportunities for connection and sharing that enrich our lives.<sup>14</sup> My son's Skype conversations with grandparents in different time zones is a weekly reminder of this; but – again – changes are in nature as well as scope, as the research of Sherry Turkle bears out.

Turkle relates the story of a teenage girl who describes feelings of guilt after a Skype call with her grandmother because she knows that her grandma conceives of Skype as a telephone call with video. The girl knows that her grandmother does not realise that instead of looking at her grandma on the screen and concentrating on what she is saying, she is actually checking and updating her Facebook account; she knows – or assumes – that she receives her grandmother's attention entirely, and that what she gives in return is only partial attention (Turkle 2011, p.266).

The 'content' of this example is a digital remediation of the telephone, with the addition of video: two people conversing over distance through computers and an Internet connection, each able to see and hear the other; however the medium's message is not merely connection, says Turkle (*ibid*), but also fragmentation, and disconnection when taken to its extreme. Neither the girl nor the grandma thinks that her conversation is mediated in a particular way, giving the communication a particular shape and meaning. The granddaughter does not analyse her choice to multitask while speaking, she just feels a disquieting, accumulating guilt (*ibid*). This story is also a neat illustration of how media effects are *felt*. As Neil Postman says, our media inform not only what we know, but also how we think about what we know. Our media are our metaphors (Postman 1987, p.15).

The next chapter employs metaphors to make manageable the many manifestations of what digital media 'says' to society through a survey of media effects as they are observed across academic literature, creative practice and social trends. At the centre of each metaphor is this chapter's technological paradox of expansion and contraction, approximation and distancing: a rapid remapping of what is possible, what is expected and what is normal in a media life.

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<sup>14</sup> Collaborative media such as wikis, open source software and citizen journalism are further, well-discussed examples of ways in which the Net enhances connectivity in positive, and often extraordinary ways.



## Chapter Three

### The Where, What and When of Digital Communication



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*Upon this gifted age, in its dark hour, rains from the sky a  
meteoric shower of facts. They lie unquestioned, uncombined.  
Wisdom enough to leech us of our ill is daily spun. But there  
exists no loom to weave it into fabric.*

**Edna St. Vincent Millay<sup>15</sup>**

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This morning I travelled to the municipal library on the *Metro Cable*, an elevated cable-car system that connects new media with old, a suspended link between the precipitous *barrios* that spill up valley walls like milk boiling in a pot, and the Medellín that my wife's grandparents would have recognised, or, as little as 20 years ago, the Medellín that Pablo Escobar knew when he ruled the city as its unofficial but universally recognised mayor. The cable cars seat eight people, four on either side of the hydraulic doors, and glide above the homes of displaced peasants whose 'invasion suburbs' continue to push up mountain slopes without planning or permits. The

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<sup>15</sup> In Postman 2004, p.3.

weight of stones, bricks and wet laundry drying in the sun holds mismatched sheets of iron roofing to the irregular angles of timber, brick, plastic and cardboard structures. Everything is improvised. But in the time it takes a bougainvillea or gardenia to grow and blossom the improvisation becomes established and thoughtfully curated chaos. Electrical cables arrive, first as clandestine connections to the grid that also typically serve as clotheslines, and later as official, subsidised – but no longer free – connection to the city power supply. At this time drinking water and sewerage also begin to link the homes, and addresses give names to the chaos, locating each house within the framework of the international postal system. From the cable car, which connects to and is part of the metropolitan public transport system, I can see all this, and from the municipal library I can study and reflect on what I see, but in both cases I look on from a cursory distance. I cannot smell the laundry soap, gardenias or sewerage, and despite the distorting volume of the music bellowing from oversized speakers, the *reggaeton*, *vallenato* and *cumbia* tunes that flood the narrow walkways and streets below only seep, muffled, into the well-sealed, German-engineered carriages; the domestic conversations are of course inaudible. I can see life below, images and headlines of difficulties and traumas different to my own, but I have to imagine the details that would breathe a semblance of life into the facts that I can share here by way of information and description of a morning commute; a journey I will return to throughout this chapter.

The *barrios* are communications media, as are the homes, alleyways, cable cars, Medellín in its entirety, and this thesis, because each is a specific social and symbolic environment, a particular organisation of people, objects and ideas in time and space that structures meaning and response and consequently the thoughts, feelings, expectations and relationships of its participants, or inhabitants, in particular ways (Nystrom in Sternberg 2002, pp.6-7). In this sense we have always lived *in* media, but digital technologies, and the Internet as the unifying architecture of these technologies, nevertheless alter and extend our mediated world in ways that radically remap human relationships, expectations and visions of the world. This chapter is an exploration of these socio-topographic changes in media – digital media, but not only digital media – through a survey of how the Internet is represented metaphorically in academic and artistic texts. An additional focus is the networks of power that shape

and are embedded within new and old media, without which any understanding of media through metaphor would lack depth (Mansell 2004, p.100).

Metaphorical understandings of the Internet's place in our lives are many, varied, and often opposing, extending in this way the technological paradox observed in Chapter Two. From this survey it emerges that the Internet is alternately understood as an ordered archive or as an ocean of meaninglessness; as a service that results either in homogeneity and equivalence, or in freedom and individualism; and as a window to the world or a technology of the hearth. These binary representations of the Net are discussed here in relation to three unifying metaphors for digital communication, each of which illuminates the ramifications for how we produce, consume and conceive of long-form narrative journalism in the digital era. Drawing from journalism practice, these three metaphors can be understood as the 'Where?', 'What?' and 'When?' of digital communication. The most concise of these is a study of 'What' the Internet is in terms of its formal qualities. It is argued here that the Net is primarily a visual medium, and – more specifically – that it is socially, aesthetically and morally a medium of the 'image' (Cramerotti 2011, pp.1-2; Radovan 2001, p.243). The second metaphor explores 'where' the Net is and argues that the logic of digital communication has much in common with the logic of urban culture, the city becoming an extension of the Internet and the Internet an extension of the city, a new medium meeting, incorporating and extending an older medium, and vice-versa, thus presenting the two faces of what Bolter and Grusin describe as "remediation" (Bolter & Grusin 2000). In purely theoretical terms this idea is not new. Marshall McLuhan observed that the content of any new medium is an older medium, and Janet Sternberg's analysis of physical environments as communications media – what she calls the 'yin' dimension of media ecology scholarship – provides a precedent for discussing built environments as communications media (McLuhan 2003; Sternberg 2002); however here the convergence and complementarity of urban and digital cultures provides a qualitatively different mediascape for daily communication across time and space, morphing not only media forms but also, and more importantly, ways of being in and understanding the world. The permeable borders between digital and material spaces, and the evolving nature of our relationship to each, are a central but underexplored aspect of our 'new new media ontologies'. As David Morley urges, we must find ways of discussing the intersections of daily activities across digital and

material spaces in ways that do not falsely juxtapose the ‘virtual’ of the one with the ‘real’ of the other (Morley 2011, p.275). This challenge is approached here through the work of David Harvey, who analyses the ambiguity of space by dividing it into three categories: absolute space, which is physical space as we experience it; relative space, which is space as it exists relative to other spaces and to objects within the space; and relational space, which can be understood as how a space exists within its representations and imaginings (Harvey 2006).

The third unifying metaphor considers the ‘When’ of digital communication and presents the Internet as a medium of skimming stones. If the Internet is a sea of information, as it is often described, then here I will suggest that on its surface we are skimming like stones, and I will argue that this is an important metaphor for understanding the nature of communication in the hybrid spaces of a media life.

The task of understanding the internet as a medium that we live with, and in, is critical within the overall scope of this thesis because the subsequent chapters provide the ‘How?’ and the ‘Why?’ of digital long-form narrative journalism, discussing the possibility and importance of subverting the logic of digital communication to retain and foster complex and nuanced communication that endures multiple readings, evoking questions as well as providing answers, and allowing a reader to see him or herself as an Other within our mediated world. What is my relationship as a passenger on the *Metro Cable* to the people below me, for example? What can we know of each other, and not only *of* each other – the knowledge that life exists in a certain place – but also *about* each other, and the many ways in which our lives are connected?

To speak of connection is, of course, to interrogate power in its symbolic, material and systemic forms; yet in her work on new media, Robin Mansell laments the tendency within the study of digital media to evade discourses of power in preference for an implicit belief that the Internet brings with it a preternatural shift in social and economic relationships, and this criticism can be extended to the field of media ecology more broadly (Mansell 2004, p.100). Marshall McLuhan’s scholarship is commonly criticised for its failure to incorporate political economy, to recognise that his proverbial fish cannot fully comprehend water without considering the networks of power that shape relationships in, around and above rivers, lakes, fishbowls and oceans (Marshall 2000, pp.31-32). Power is embedded in media, because media are

embedded in and understood through the social structures that shape and precede them (Mansell 2004). The *metro cable* of my morning commute is an important, impressive and innovative public infrastructure, but it is also an extension of Medellín's centralised structure of economic power. When dirt-floor homes are connected to the municipal electrical grid and sewerage system they are given addresses, because without an address the inhabitants of the home cannot be billed for the privilege of their connection to the city. Electricity also allows for the consumption of new products – fridges, blenders, microwaves, sound systems and televisions – and the inhabitants are incorporated more fully into an industrial structure of consumption. Thus, in addition to the remediation of old media forms, new media also remediate embedded systems of symbolic and material power, and consequently it is the task of new media analysts, says Scott Lash, “not to be less political, but to be more political” (2007, p.75).

Although the political economy of digital communication is not a primary (explicit) focus of this thesis, it is nevertheless necessary to state, briefly, how this thesis conceives of, and deals with power in relation to new media.

The Internet extends democratic freedoms, as theorists such as Clay Shirky contend (2008); however, to an important degree, these are freedoms entrenched in an ideology of consumption in which the greatest democratic freedom is the right to choose, and in which choice itself is largely demeaned to the ambit of the market (Bauman et al 2013). Clay Shirky's proclamation that, “in the weblog world there are no authorities, only masses”, must therefore be tempered with consideration for how the masses themselves embody, or play to, capitalist power structures, and therefore constitute their own authorities (Shirky 2008, p.94). A clear empirical manifestation of the Internet's extension of existing power is that the concentration of media ownership continues to intensify, and that in the USA the top 10 websites accounted for 31 per cent of page views in 2001, 40 per cent in 2006, and about 75 per cent in 2010 (Anderson and Wolff 2010).<sup>16</sup> Search-engines like Google filter information in ways that amplify popularity, establishing and then reinforcing a consensus on what

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<sup>16</sup> These statistics are significant, however – given the transience of statistics in an industry that is evolving as quickly as digital communications – the trend is of more theoretical use and interest than the numerical detail. The numbers merely provide a snapshot of the future unfolding.

information is valuable and what is not, as sociologist James Evans discovered when he surveyed 34 million scholarly articles published in academic journals between 1945 and 2005 (Evans 2008). Evans analysed the citations included in the articles to determine if the scope of scholarly research had broadened or narrowed in the era of digital publication. Contrary to his expectations, he found that increased availability of information resulted in a narrowing of science and scholarship (Evans 2008).

This contraction of scholarly perspective is indicative of what Nigel Thrift describes as our ‘technological unconscious’, an idea touched upon in Chapter One, which is characterised by an increasing reliance on powerful and unknowable information technologies that come to produce everyday life (Thrift 2005). According to Scott Lash, a “society of ubiquitous media means a society in which power is increasingly in the algorithm”, and, because algorithms are blind to how different cultures construct varied and elaborate value systems, one consequence of ubiquitous digital media is the production of cultural equivalence and homogeneity, even in instances where the Internet is used to strengthen specific cultural connections (Lash 2007, p.71).

Homogeneity is both a product and symptom of power, and it occurs on several fronts. Stephen Lax observes that the ease with which binary code is processed means that there is no longer a material difference between images, sounds or text (2009, p.170); and Mario Radovan associates this formal equivalence with digital media’s propensity to send the same essential “message” to people of different cultural traditions (2001, p.242). Somebody using an Internet browser in Guatemala acts and thinks in essentially the same way as somebody using a similar interface in Mongolia, and in this way, writes Radovan, “information technology promotes a homogenisation of the space of human thought and behaviour” (ibid). The Internet is infinite, but in practice our employment of standardised algorithms to help us navigate its immensity limits the scope of what we see and know. Roger Silverstone makes a similar observation:

From one perspective culture, as meaning, value, experience, has become disconnected from the chains of the immediate and the local. Time and space are compressed. New media, new technologies, have extended the range and reach of communication, and access to information is infinite. The result is a quantum shift in the homogenisation of cultures, in the undermining of the traditional, and in the disembedding of culture from locality and particularity (2007, pp.9-10).

Cultural homogenisation is not, of course, confined to digital media. Ivan Illich observes that cities increasingly take on the characteristics of industrial, mass-produced ‘tools’, each marked with identical stamps, diminishing or destroying the unique histories and cultures that had evolved in relative harmony within the confines of specific environments (1973, p.15); and it was this imposition of industrial, market-driven values in the design and conduct of everyday life that led to Jean Baudrillard’s argument that society is dominated by the digital logic of the code, rendering everything both equivalent to and indifferent to everything else (in Poster 2001, p.5).

For Manuel Castells, “the key feature of wireless communications is not mobility but perpetual connectivity”, an observation that suggests time is also subject to homogenisation (2009, p69). Teenagers no longer understand the concept of watching television on somebody else’s schedule, and, although we are able to watch television on computer screens, tablets and telephones, the significant shift in cultural patterns occurs not only in the amplification of TV into new spaces, but also, and more importantly, in its constant availability, on demand, thus marking concepts like ‘prime-time’ culturally anachronistic (Castells 2009, pp.64-69; Dimmick, Feaster & Hoplamazian 2010, pp.23-24).

As will be discussed shortly in relation to ‘where’ the Internet is, the digital shift towards cultural homogenisation exists in dialectical conflict with a counterforce of capsular localism, whereby digital media are perceived not as “technologies of cosmos” but primarily as “technologies of the hearth” (Beer 2009, p.5; Lieven De Cauter in Jansson 2011, p.239); however, what is important here, in preparation for a discussion of the aforementioned unifying metaphors for digital communication, is consideration for how digital communication embodies systems of power, and, additionally – and to aid this study of power – for how the complex blurring of digital and smelly spaces in everyday life can be mapped and understood through David Harvey’s framework for the study of space.

Harvey’s division of space into absolute, relative and relational categories is simple, but also in constant dialectical tension and infinitely applicable, and therefore complex. Harvey writes:

If we regard space as absolute it becomes a ‘thing in itself’ with an existence independent of matter. It then possesses a structure which we can use to pigeon-hole

or individuate phenomena. The view of relative space proposes that it be understood as a relationship between objects which exists only because objects exist and relate to each other. There is another sense in which space can be viewed as relative and I choose to call this relational space – space regarded in the manner of Leibniz, as being contained in objects in the sense that an object can be said to exist only insofar as it contains and represents within itself relationships to other objects (2006, p.121).

Photography provides a useful case study for illustrating Harvey's ideas. Digital photography is distinct to the analogue form in its abstract immateriality (Ritchin 2009). The absolute space of photography – space as it is materially experienced – has changed from a strip of light-sensitive silver emulsion that captures a material negative image, to pure, malleable information: a complex binary code that few photographers understand, despite its centrality to our craft (Harvey 2006; Ritchin 2009). For the photographer, however, the absolute photographic space is ultimately still what is seen and captured through the viewfinder. Although the digital image remains immaterial until it is printed on paper or displayed on a screen, the photographer feels a power, a jubilation, even, in the ability to create an absolute space, a two-dimensional image, composed from the absolute material space that the image represents, and defined by the relative space of that which is excluded from the photographic frame (Harvey 2006). Because the photographic image is itself a representation, the photograph's space is at once absolute and relational, and is further defined by the relative space in which the photograph is taken, as well as the relative space in which the photograph is seen (ibid).

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The above photograph is of pedestrians and commuters at midday on Anzac Parade, an important artery connecting Sydney's southern beaches with the city centre. It seems superfluous to say that the photograph is not Anzac Parade, but rather a representation of the space captured photographically in the moment the camera's shutter was released; however, when speaking of photography that is frequently what is suggested: 'this is my sister, Sarah', or 'this is the Opera House' (Barthes 2000). The absolute space is conflated with the relational space, and temporality is transformed: the photograph is not read as Anzac Parade at a specific point of time; it is simply Anzac Parade (Harvey 2006; Barthes 2000). What Pierre Bourdieu describes as symbolic violence is thus exerted, because a complex reality – time and space in dynamic motion – is framed in a single, static representational moment, an abstract relational space of binary code, which itself becomes an absolute space when seen on a computer screen, gallery wall, or the page of this thesis (Bourdieu et al. 1992; Harvey 2006; Sontag 2008; Wheeler 2002).

A photograph hanging on the wall of a gallery is one medium and one space existing within another, and the same is true of the Internet and its place within the absolute spaces of everyday life. Just as a photograph can influence power relations in the world it represents,<sup>17</sup> so too does the Internet as an absolute and relational space remediate and embody existing power dynamics. Remediation of global inequalities of wealth and power can be seen in the fact that electronic waste associated with digital media is dumped in impoverished countries where children disassemble toxic materials with little or no understanding of the resulting health hazards for themselves or their communities; and in the fact that two Google searches from a desktop computer allegedly amount to the same carbon emissions as boiling a litre of water in a kettle – a fact that, ironically, can only be retrieved and confirmed through online searches (Christensen, Jansson & Christensen 2011, p.7).

The boundaries between digital and material spaces are porous and blurred. Each exists in its own right, and as spaces they are therefore absolute, but in practice they

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<sup>17</sup> One thinks of the work of the *Bang Bang Club* in Apartheid South Africa, the photographs of the Vietnam War, or more recently of the images of torture in Abu Ghraib, and of the changes in social consciousness that these photographs engendered.

are predominantly relative spaces within the absolute space of the one world that we inhabit, understand, imagine and contest. Additionally, ‘cyberspace’ is the canvas upon which we construct our understanding of the world beyond, and – increasingly – within our geographical neighbourhoods; it is the world as we represent it to ourselves, or – within Harvey’s framework – it is, fundamentally, relational space. The growing ubiquity of relational space in our lives is a central pillar of our ‘new new media ontologies’, and it is also the source of an additional element of irony in our mediated world, because it is difficult to know of, or about the inequalities and injustices of global power structures without entering into the Internet as a relational space, as a space that constructs our understandings of the world that it remediates. This is Deuze’s media feedback loop restated. Silverstone writes: “The media have this unique role in global culture. They provide a technological and cultural framework for the connectivity, positive or negative, without which the globe would be merely a shadow” (2007, p.10).

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The world exists without us, and yet what we perceive through digital media is a world of our own creation, it is a world remediated. Let us consider the six people in the above photograph, for example. Are they on a railway station, awaiting a train? Or are they elsewhere, in digital space, filling a moment of their day with connectivity to something, or *somewhere* else? Fragmentation in and between media is the riddle of space in our mediated world, and the riddle is serious, because it poses the ontological question of whether our experience of the world gives primacy to the planet as an

absolute space, composed of chemical elements that we can touch, smell and study empirically, or as a relational space, subjective and liquid in nature, and digital in form.

In the final chapter of *The Human Condition*, Hannah Arendt writes that the moment that marked the birth of modernity was when Galileo looked through his telescope and observed that the world was not as it appeared; absolute space was dislocated from relational space, doubt touched everything between, and the necessary conditions for scientific investigation were created (in Silverstone 2007, pp.50-51). Modern media, however, have created what Silverstone describes as a “post-modern reconciliation of Being and Appearance” in which the world is once again as it appears, this time as it appears on our screens (ibid). Just as we read the photograph of Anzac Parade *as* Anzac Parade, violating the nuances of time and of relative space, our mediated understanding of the world via screens also tends to truncate the possibilities of communication, resulting in symbolic violence towards the complexities of social life that are reduced to generalisations, clichés and stereotypes (Bourdieu et al. 1992; Calhoun 1998, pp.379-380). Beyond the fact that our mediated world is fragmented between the relative spaces of screens and train platforms, and – therefore – between the primarily relational and the primarily absolute, this bifurcation is also the most direct link between the logics of urban and digital media. Cities, like the Internet, are nature remediated, landscapes imagined and crafted through our needs, fears and desires (Bauman 2006; Harvey 2008). The city, writes urban sociologist Robert Park, is:

...man’s most successful attempt to remake the world he lives in more after his heart’s desire. But, if the city is the world which man created, it is the world in which he is henceforth condemned to live. Thus, indirectly, and without any clear sense of the nature of his task, in making the city man has remade himself (in Harvey 2008, p.23).

What is here true of the city is equally true of digital media. Indeed, this same argument, in relation to media, is at the core of Mark Deuze’s formulation of living *in* media (Deuze 2012). It is not surprising, then, that in the work of Terje Rasmussen the Internet is considered a possible guide to a sociological understanding of communication, in which “the explosive success of the Internet indicates some sort of ‘compatibility’ between the development of the Net and the transformation of the societies in which it operates” (Rasmussen 2003, p.444). The city, like the Internet,

functions as a network of people and technologies, linked through infinite connections that absorb the individual citizen into ‘capsules’, thus acting to isolate people from one another (Lieven De Cauter in Jansson 2011, p.239). Lieven de Cauter writes:

Encapsulation is the inside shutting off from the outside through a convergence of factors: urbanization and suburbanization, individualization, technologization and, especially under the pressure of the dualization of our society, a sort of internal migration: abandonment of the outside space and seclusion, often out of necessity, in protected enclaves (in Jansson 2011, pp.246-7).

This “internal migration” – akin to the *adiaphora* of Chapter Two – is worth dwelling on in relation to the photograph on the previous page, because the enclaves of our cities are increasingly digital. Our ‘community’ is on Facebook, our ‘conversations’ take place on Twitter and via Instant Messaging, and the ‘public’ spaces of everyday life are no longer parks, plazas, streets and beaches because these spaces are increasingly composed of private conversations in digital space, which, to an important degree, is our new public space (Deuze 2014, pers. comm. 22 April). People surround us, yet – in the words of Sherry Turkle – we are “alone together”, and, for most people (given that a majority of people now live in cities) our solitudes exist across the parallel logics of digital and urban spaces (Turkle 2011, from the book title).

### **The Digital City – ‘Where’ the Internet is.**

Most of what is written of urban communication within sociological and geographical texts is equally true of digital communication, and vice versa. Let me illustrate.

At its best, the \_\_\_\_\_ [Internet/city] is a cauldron of common difference, a crossroads where differing visions of the world clash and meld, producing cultures of innovation, participation and cosmopolitanism (Calhoun 1998). The \_\_\_\_\_ is also, however, a space in which indifference is the dominant ethical relationship between subjects, a relationship premised not on the “face-to-face” relationships of community, but on the “side-by-side” relations of anonymity that allow for the normalisation of difference, for the freedom to be looked past, to remain unknown (Tonkiss 2003, p.298). This strange freedom is a natural product of the \_\_\_\_\_’s scale, however the proliferation of indirect relationships associated with the \_\_\_\_\_ renders us prone to treat people

according to categories of identity associated with gender, ethnicity, class or occupation (Calhoun 1998, pp.379-380). Lars Qvortrup writes that,

Read sociologically, the \_\_\_\_\_ seems to suggest a society consisting of mutually autonomous, operatively closed systems – social systems that reproduce themselves – that are not morally integrated as in premodern times, but simply coupled through structural couplings (2003, p.462).

The loss of moral integration is associated with the absence of direct, face-to-face relationships, because most of what we know about groups and individuals who fall within one or other category of ‘otherness’ is now mediated to us. As Roger Silverstone notes (2003, p.485), sociality in the context of the \_\_\_\_\_ is by nature voluntaristic and ephemeral: “The other poses no challenge. She can be avoided.” At its worst, the \_\_\_\_\_ is therefore a space where civic culture is eroded and difference is reduced to caricature (Calhoun 1998; Silverstone 2007; Stallabrass 1995). Julian Stallabrass writes that the \_\_\_\_\_ allows, “not so much dialogue as a cacophony of separate, atomistic voices” (1995, p.12).

Occupying the mundane middle ground between the best and the worst of the \_\_\_\_\_ is what Craig Calhoun describes as the “ever-increasing prevalence of indirect social relationships” that form, to a growing extent, “the basis on which society ‘at large’ is constituted” (1992, pp.207-8). The shift towards indirect social relationships and the evolving character of public and private spheres that this shift entails is as true of the Internet as it is of cities, either noun equally capable of filling the blanks.

Where, then, does urban space end and digital space begin? The simple answer is that screens provide a border; however, given the social nature of both spaces and our mental ability to drift seamlessly between the two, such an answer proves incomplete: our brains are too agile (Damasio 2000). In practice, the relative space of digital media has become an extension of our daily experience of absolute space. We use phones to navigate cities, socially and geographically. The Internet extends the city, and vice versa. In addition to the sociological texts, above, this common logic is evident in artistic responses to digital and urban media.

The surveillance that modern society is routinely subject to via CCTV cameras and databanks has, for example, become the subject of performance art. The group ‘Surveillance Camera Players’ stages performances that explicitly address the camera

operators as the audience, and, similarly, the Manchester band Get Out Clause produced a music video by performing in front of CCTV cameras and then requesting the footage under Britain's Freedom of Information Act (Phillips 2011, p.176). In both cases surveillance is used to make surveillance visible. The intersections of digital and urban spaces are interrogated, and, using the Internet to make the artworks public, urban experience is extended into digital space where it is re-assimilated into new urban spaces via portable digital devices.

The art of controversial British graffiti artist, Banksy, also incorporates and tests the logics of digital and urban media through its formal interrogation of contemporary culture, employing public urban space as a broadcast medium in an attempt to defy the logic of social atomisation and privatisation (Bull 2011). Clay Shirky notes that, online, much of our daily communication is *in* public, but not *for* the public, and – again – this is equally true of our communication in urban public spaces: passengers on a train can hear a woman's phone conversation regardless of whether or not she is addressing the passengers (Shirky 2008, p.90). Banksy reclaims public spaces *for* public communication, broadcasting his critiques of contemporary culture from city walls, and later via YouTube, becoming in this way a social artist whose work spans urban and digital media. His anonymity as a public artist further feeds into the dual logic of our urban-digital mediascape.

*Busking the Silence* is also an intervention in our understanding of space and mediated communication. Like Banksy's graffiti, it highlights the social value of public art, celebrating the ability of buskers to interrupt our habitual isolation and prompting us to reconnect with the absolute, public spaces of smelly media. Like the work of the aforementioned performance artists, *Busking the Silence* also communicates via its form, encouraging social interaction and rewarding curiosity with music and story.

In practice the city can therefore be seen as a useful metaphor for understanding the nature of digital communication. But the formula of one media simply 'extending' the other ultimately proves unsatisfactory for locating the Net in the spaces of everyday life, because it dismisses the very real, very important differences between the material and the digital, and therefore obfuscates how our evolving experience of space influences our ways of understanding the world. A life lived *in* and *for* media is a new social condition directly related to the increasing primacy of relational space in

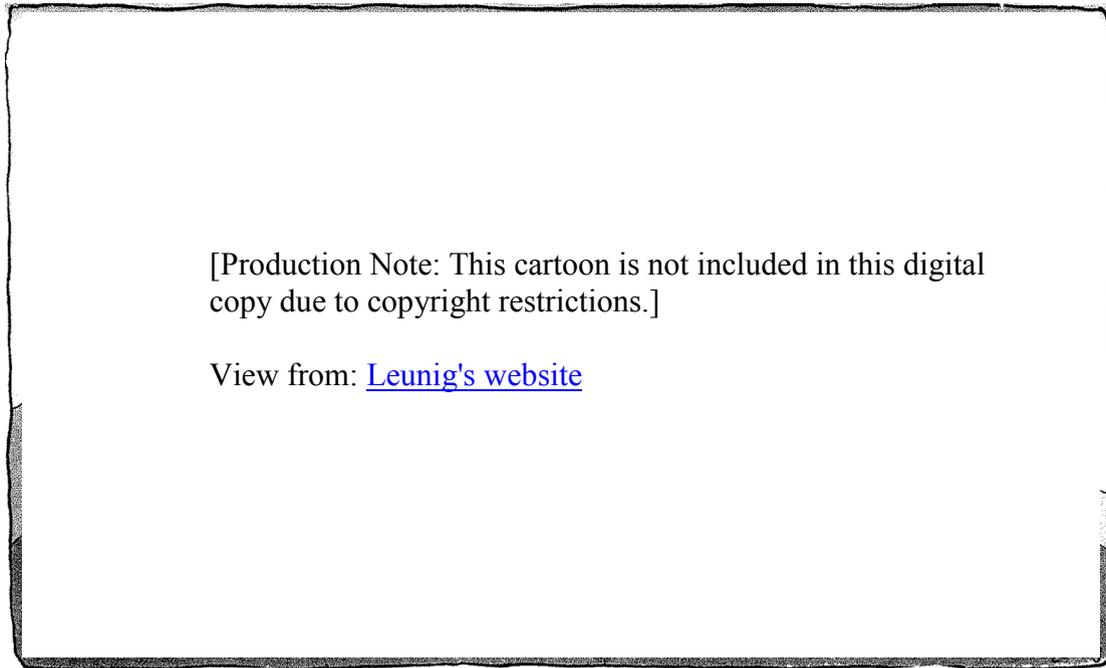
our conception of what the world is and what life is for. Digital space is, as already stated, a real and separate sphere of our one world. It is a relative space that increasingly interacts with the other absolute spaces of the planet, shaping our experience of public and private spheres and mediating our experience of everyday life. But, as a relational space, as a space that shapes the way we understand and imagine the world, the Net also exists, in a very real way, within the mind of each individual user.

In his theory of the Network Society and what he describes as “mass self-communication”, Manuel Castells draws on Antonio Damasio’s understanding of the mind not as an organ, but rather as a process in which the brain interacts with the world via the human body to produce mental images, which, in turn, produce meaning (Castells 2009, pp.70-71; Damasio 2000). The ‘where’ of the Internet can, in this sense, be located in our interaction with it as an absolute space, and in the formative role that this interaction has in the mental images that constitute the mind. As the Net permeates our life it increasingly becomes the space within which social communication occurs, and, unlike the predominantly face-to-face interactions of absolute space, the indirect, “side-by-side”, or “mass self-communication” of digital media produces mental images drawn from relational space, and, therefore, what Silverstone observes as a reconciliation of Appearance with Being (Silverstone 2007, pp.50-51). Although this appears to be a post-modern formula, the placement of the Net within the human mind ought be understood as a further extension of the solipsistic nature of liquid modernity, and, situated within Harvey’s framework of space, the idea avoids reducing digital space to existing *only* as a virtual sphere within the mind. Digital space is absolute, relative and relational. Its effects are felt in the hands of the world’s poorest children and in the minds of the world’s most powerful. The Net can be found in the cloud, in our pocket and inside our heads. It is, ultimately, where we shape our paradigm of normality (Winner 2003, p.597).<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Here I write “we” with some reservation. My intention is not to normalise or universalise a particular, materially affluent experience of the world; but, rather, as Silverstone argues, we are all mediated to one another, and as I have earlier stated, my interest is for how we live with one another in a world in which digital media is increasingly pervasive. The “we” is therefore intended as an invitation rather than an imposition, and it acknowledges that, just as mobile technology is introducing digital culture into the majority world at a rapid rate, so too

An Image Medium – ‘What’ the Internet is.



Australian cartoonist Michael Leunig is arguably one of the nation’s most important philosophers and social commentators, a weekly newspaper ‘columnist’ whose poignant observations are written in curly brushstrokes. In the cartoon above, the mountain range and the achievement of reaching its highest peak are rendered less important than the hiker’s impression of it, the trace that he leaves for consumption in our mediated world. Leunig illustrates the importance of the individual in absolute space, and of the presence of the crowd in the individual. In his cartoon we see our evolving paradigm for being, our new social ontology with me at its centre, and not merely me in absolute space, but me as I exist in relational space, a digital me curated through comments, ‘likes’ and images: a “project of the self” (Thompson 1995, p.233). That Leunig’s philosophy is visual in form provides further scaffolding for the argument I will make here, that the Internet is socially, aesthetically and morally a medium of the image, and – as will become clear in the ensuing chapters – it also provides a scaffold for this thesis more broadly.

Morally and metaphorically, the ‘Internet as Image’ builds on the argument presented in Chapter Two that the extension and subsequent numbing of our central nervous

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do many people in countries like Australia choose to live a life of relative technological disconnection.

system associated with digitally mediated communication results in *adiaphora*, a loss of meaning beyond the self (Bauman et al. 2013). *Adiaphora* thus provides a beginning for this exploration of ‘what’ the Internet is, as does the metaphor of the Internet as city, however the ‘Internet as Image’ resonates literally as well as metaphorically, because images increasingly constitute the substance of day-to-day communication.

According to Mario Radovan, the primacy of the image in digital communication has much to do with its logic of homogenisation, because an image, “expresses a message almost instantly, and crosses linguistic, cultural and political borders far more easily than the printed word does” (Radovan 2001, p.243). The image is therefore promoted in digital media as the “dominant form of communication” (ibid). This is not to say that there are more images on the Internet than words – there are not; rather, it suggests that what we *see* most, what we appreciate and respond to most, are images. In practice this is evident in the design of digital devices such as tablets and mobile phones. The iPad, for example, is an adequate technology for reading, however its glossy backlit screen makes it more suited to displaying photographs and videos than text, and as a medium the iPad therefore extends the logic of television and social media more than it does the logic of the printed book. Similarly, the glossy screens of mobile phones are increasing in size precisely because they are so often used to display and share images.<sup>19</sup>

Focussing on Western culture, Alfredo Cramerotti traces the rise of the image since World War II through what he identifies as the social convergence of “urbanism (the city), advertising (the consumer) and media (the spectacle) that altogether shaped a new form of aesthetics” (2009, p.57). Summing up the aesthetic primacy and moral significance of the image, Cramerotti writes:

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<sup>19</sup> According to the Visual Networking Index (VNI) produced annually by Cisco, videos accounted for 57 per cent of all global consumer Internet traffic in 2012, not including peer-to-peer file sharing, and this is forecast to reach 69 per cent in 2017. To put this in perspective, in 2017 the gigabyte equivalent of every film ever made is forecast to cross global IP networks every three minutes. In 2012, over half the global video traffic was downloaded to mobile devices. Available: [http://www.cisco.com/en/US/solutions/collateral/ns341/ns525/ns537/ns705/ns827/white\\_paper\\_c11-520862.pdf](http://www.cisco.com/en/US/solutions/collateral/ns341/ns525/ns537/ns705/ns827/white_paper_c11-520862.pdf)

The visualization of our acts, stories, and indeed our thoughts is what now constitutes the main discourse of the public realm. There's no public sphere without the sharing of experiences and opinions, and in our age what we share most are images. They have become a commodity. We trade our existence in images, and we shape ourselves through them (2011, pp.1-2).

In its emphasis on visual perception, the Internet can be seen to be an extension of television, which in turn provided an extension of the telegraph's logic of immediacy (Postman 1987, p.66). In his research on the nature of television, Neil Postman laments the consequences of a cultural conversation conducted through images rather than words (Postman 1987, p.7). The telegraph launched a three-pronged attack on typography's definition of discourse, writes Postman, "introducing on a large scale irrelevance, impotence, and incoherence" (ibid). Nuance and complexity are reduced to stereotype – what is instantly understandable – and entertainment becomes, "the natural format for the representation of all experience" (Postman 1987, p.89). And because the Internet remediates the logic of TV in such a way that *we, who were the audience* – to paraphrase Jay Rosen – can now produce our own images for public consumption, the 'Internet as Image' can be read as both metaphorically and formally accurate (Rosen 2011). The focus of communication is diverted away from the presence of Others and towards a project of the self in which, "community becomes conceptually and empirically, and without irony or reflexivity, both a projection and an extension of the self" (Silverstone 2003, p.486).

In relational space, the projection of the self is, invariably, an image. It is 'me' as I wish to be thought of and understood. Paradoxically, perhaps, we subject ourselves to a symbolic violence of our own creation, reducing ourselves to the simplifications of an image written in binary code. But that, of course, is the point. Of more concern is that Others are equally reduced to glib, expendable stereotypes, and that their presence in our mediascape serves primarily to normalise our own, unquestioned place in the world (ibid). In the opening pages of *Media Morality*, Roger Silverstone illustrates how rare it is to recognise our own inherent 'Otherness', to see one's self produced as an image that is not a product of one's own curation. Silverstone writes:

I have a memory of an interview broadcast on BBC Radio 4 on The World at One during the height of the war in Afghanistan which followed hard on the heels of the attack on the World Trade Center. It was with an Afghani blacksmith who, having apparently failed to hear or understand the US airplane based, supposedly blanket, propaganda coverage of his country, offered his own account of why so many bombs were falling around his village. It was because, his translated voice explained, Al

Qaeda had killed many Americans and their donkeys and had destroyed some of their castles (2007, p.1).

Silverstone argues that this passage resonates precisely because the framing of the listener as a mediated Other is so rare (ibid). Furthermore, it is only in recognising our own strange place in the world, says Silverstone, that we can properly recognise and hear the Other:

[The blacksmith] appears to us as a representative, a rare representative, of the doubly distant: the proverbial man in the street, or in this case the man in the smithy, and as someone as far away from us, perhaps in time as well as space, as it is possible to conceive. Ordinary and usually unheard. But now speaking about our misfortune as well as his. And his appearance represents a life, too, when we might otherwise only see – indeed we normally do only see – a body. A silent body, a body perplexed, a body in pain, a dead body. A victim (2007, p.2).

At the core of Silverstone's exploration of media morality is a concern for reflexivity, and its loss in a mediascape that is based primarily on the image, and in which both the Other and the Self are consequently diminished. A critical, reflexive vision of the world is one in which we understand ourselves in relation to Others (Bauman et al. 2013, p.165). It is a philosophy of humanism, in which, as Józef Tischner puts it, "I know that I am, because I know that another is" (in Kapuscinski 2008, p.8). It is thus of little surprise that Silverstone builds his ideas and arguments on the philosophy of Emmanuel Lévinas, for whom interaction with Others is the most vital of human experiences (Kapuscinski 2008, p.34; Levinas 1998).<sup>20</sup>

Silverstone parts from Lévinas' philosophy in one important aspect, however, because where Silverstone associates individualism with an erosion of public life, Lévinas considers the individual to be more human, better, wiser and less inscrutable when she is alone (Kapuscinski 2008, p.36). Lévinas wrote much of his work during and soon after World War II, and his philosophy came largely as a response to the Holocaust and his own experience as a prisoner of war. Bridging the work of Lévinas and Silverstone, therefore, is a fifty-year period in which, as Cramerotti writes, urbanism, consumerism and sensationalism collectively recast modern culture through electronic and digital media (2009, p.57). To quote Silverstone,

The dominant trope in the analysis of twentieth-century public life has been the erosion of public life: the palpable decline in a culture of care, the paradoxical lack

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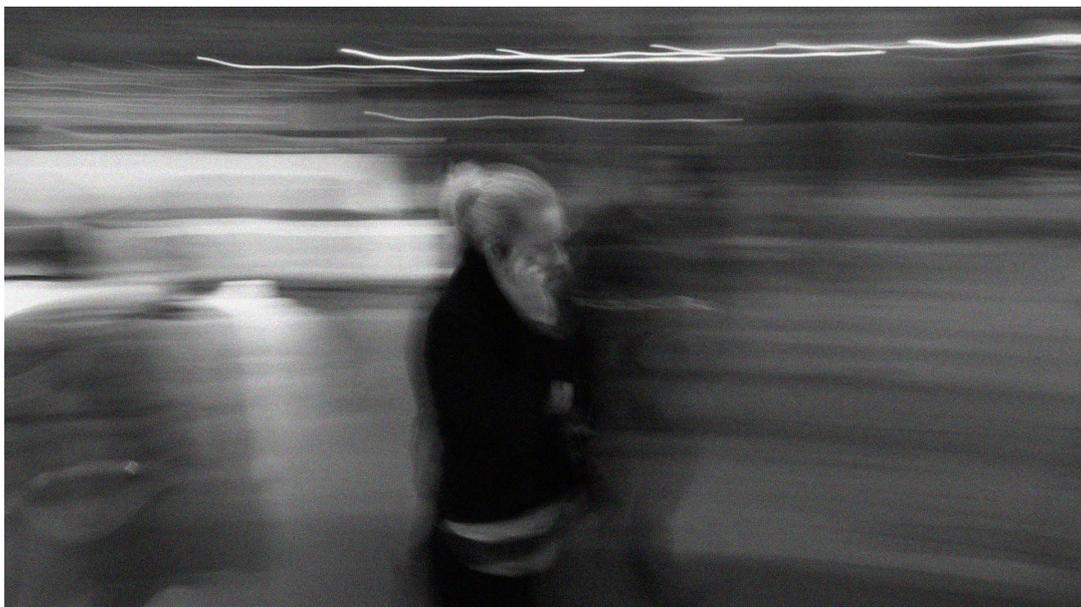
<sup>20</sup> The connections between Roger Silverstone and Emmanuel Lévinas are explored in greater depth in Chapter Six.

of, or breakdown within, public communication, and these weaknesses have been expressed in increasing alienation from the formal processes of politics and engagement in public life; perhaps not for all, but for many, especially in the wealthy and highly mediated democracies of industrial society (2007, p.170).

Where Lévinas focused his philosophy on the danger of collective thought and action, Silverstone’s work responds to the absence of collective thought in public life. Beneath this difference, however, is a common emphasis on the existential importance of Others. For Lévinas, the recognition of the Other provides the basis for a meaningful life, and for Silverstone it is the necessary condition for a socially sustainable mediascape in which our mutual connections can contribute to a constructive civic culture (Silverstone 2007). It is arguably here that one can locate the root cause of what Silverstone describes as the “second of the great environmental crises with which global societies are increasingly having to deal” (Silverstone 2007, p.v). Online, the image that people see the most is reflected back at them. The Internet is metaphorically and – to an increasing degree, literally – a mirror, a solipsism that serves to shelter the individual from the world within the confines of an image that confirms the individual’s pre-existing worldview.

**Skimming Stones – ‘When’ the Internet is.**

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Looking down at Medellín's invasion suburbs from the *Metro Cable* I am removed from the life below by a cursory distance. But there is another element that hinders meaningful engagement with what I see: movement. I am never still.

To ask 'when' the Internet is appears to be a redundant question. The Net is *everywhen*,<sup>21</sup> a constant in our mediated formulation of past, present and future. We cannot study time except from within the confines of media. But the Internet also sets us in constant motion, and in relation to the spaces of our digital-urban mediascape its temporal character can therefore be expressed as the speed at which digital communication is experienced. Indeed, because space cannot be disentangled from time, the geography of digital space can only be understood in relation to its temporality (Harvey 2006, p.123). Here I will suggest that across the hybrid spaces of our media life we are skimming like stones, and I will argue that this metaphor is intrinsic to the nature of digital communication, especially as it relates to immersive forms of communication such as long-form narrative journalism.

A skimming stone requires two things to remain airborne. It must spin, and it must travel fast. 'To skim', literally, is to touch lightly upon the surface of things, which is apt. But of metaphorical concern is the speed of the stone's motion, and the chaos and blur of its spin. On the Internet I can learn of sports results or disasters in remote regions of the world from people who are there, as it happens. At the same time I can speak with my in-laws, email them a photograph of my son, buy a woollen jumper, search for an address and download music. That is, I can spin. And I do. This is where the nature of the Internet differs most from telegraphy or any other preceding medium. We have access to multiple bi-directional channels, and using them simultaneously is natural.

Postman and McLuhan believed that a medium not only determines the form of a society's conversation within that particular medium, but that the nature, or metaphor of an epoch's predominant medium shapes the quality of a society's discourse more

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<sup>21</sup> Australian anthropologist W.E.H. Stanner coined the neologism 'everywhen' in his attempt to find appropriate language for the Aboriginal *Dreaming*, the metaphysic that lies at the centre of Aboriginal life and spiritual belief. I therefore use the term cautiously, and my intention is not to connect the Internet with the Dreaming, which – according to Stanner – cannot be fixed in time, and is thus as far from our modern understanding of life as is possible to conceive. See: Stanner, W.E.H (2011) *The Dreaming and Other Essays*, Robert Manne (ed.), Black Inc. Press: Melbourne.

generally (McLuhan 2003; Postman 1987). Recent neurological research suggests that this theory, central to media ecology, may have a physiological basis. Although scientific understandings of the human mind remain hypothetical, and paradoxically constrained by the brain's ability to understand the brain (Damasio 2000, p.258), recent empirical findings in sociology and cognitive neuroscience illustrate how our use of digital media is reshaping our habits of communication, and the studies have clear and serious implications for long-form narrative journalism.

One finding is that the ability to concentrate on a narrative, and remember it, has less to do with intensely focusing on the issue at hand than it has with the capacity to block out extraneous stimuli (Zanto and Gazzaley 2009, p. 3065). That is, what one is doing is less important than what one is *not doing*. Evidence shows that the multitasking associated with normal Internet use impairs our ability to filter relevant and important information from trivia, significantly impairing concentration, and that this, in turn, adversely affects our capacity for deep thought, memory, analysis, problem solving and creativity (ibid; Greenfield 2009, p.71).

A second finding, associated with brain plasticity, is that what is true of our 'online brain' is also true of our brain more generally (Kolb, Gibb & Robinson 2003). Hence the failure to communicate meaningfully with mediated Others in the relational spaces of the Net erodes our ability to enter into constructive dialogue with strangers in other, more traditional media, including the smelly spaces of civic life. And from this trend towards side-by-side communication emerges a third finding in recent sociological and neurological research, which, according to scholars such as Clifford Nass<sup>22</sup> and Sherry Turkle, is the most troubling of sociological changes, because heavy use of communications technologies is associated with a loss in our capacity for empathy (Immordino-Yang et al. 2009, pp. 3-5; Richtel 2010; Turkle 2011, p.293). Sherry Turkle cites a 2010 University of Michigan study that has tracked levels of social empathy in over 14,000 college students since 1979. Data analysis from the research shows that the students' interest in other people has declined dramatically since 2000, with today's generation scoring 40 per cent lower in

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<sup>22</sup> A discussion with Clifford Nass on these issues can be found in Matt Richtel's Pulitzer Prize winning series for *The New York Times*, 'Your brain on computers'.

empathy than their counterparts twenty and thirty years ago (Turkle 2011, p.293).

Turkle writes:

Today's college students are, for example, far less likely to say that it is valuable to try to put oneself in the place of others or to try to understand their feelings. The authors of this study associate students' lack of empathy with the availability of online games and social networking. An online connection can be deeply felt, but you only need to deal with the part of the person you see in your game world or social network. Young people don't seem to feel they need to deal with more, and over time they lose the inclination. One might say that absorbed in those they have "friended," children lose interest in friendship (ibid).

Loss of empathy can thus be understood through the prisms of two parallel and related trends. The first of these has already been explored: the confluence of concerns associated with consumerism, urbanism and the image that culminate in *adiaphora*; and the second is the fragmentation of daily communication across multiple media and multiple tasks, and the habitual skimming between these tasks and media that limits the depths of meaning to which our daily communication can plunge. The conquest of time is a boon economically and geographically, but the ensuing depletion in the time allowed for communication is socially deleterious, because it is the social emotions such as compassion, empathy and admiration that require the most response time from the brain for neural activation, and it is these emotions that make communication meaningful in a social sense (Immordino-Yang et al. 2009, pp.3-5).

Meaningful communication, in other words, is difficult, and requires time; but as the expectations associated with effortless technological connection populate our moral imagination, the corrosion of our ability to pay attention to one another, even when we are in the same room or sharing the same restaurant table, begins to manifest itself in the normalisation of distraction, and in a pervasive loss of meaning (Chouliaraki 2010; Turkle 2011).

These manifestations were touched upon in Chapter Two, however their relationship to our chaotic movement across media must here be emphasised, because the movement itself is arguably bereft of any meaning or purpose other than its own essential momentum (Postman 2004, pp.3-4; Strate 2004, p.28). On the nature of text messages, for example, Turkle writes:

Texts, by nature telegraphic, can certainly be emotional, insightful, and sexy. They can lift us up. They can make us feel understood, desired, and supported. But they are not a place to deeply understand a problem or to explain a complicated situation. They are momentum. They fill a moment (ibid).

According to Mario Radovan, it is increasingly rare to consider digital technology as a means to enlightenment or fulfilment, and increasingly common to see the technology as an end in itself (2001, p.237). 'Friending' somebody truncates and fragments the dynamic, difficult and rewarding process of friendship, and singular acts of communication are similarly dislocated from the unifying framework of communication as culture and process (Carey 1992; Turkle 2011, p.293).

In a mediascape of skimming stones it is the individual who is spinning, not the world, and the perpetual motion is a new *normal* condition, altering the amount of time that we allow for each other, and that we are willing to dedicate to meaningful communication. On texting, Sherry Turkle continues:

A thirteen-year-old tells me she "hates the phone and never listens to voicemail." Texting offers just the right amount of access, just the right amount of control. She is a modern Goldilocks: for her, texting puts people not too close, not too far, but at just the right distance. The world is now full of modern Goldilockses, people who take comfort in being in touch with a lot of people whom they also keep at bay. A twenty-one-year-old college student reflects on the new balance: "I don't use my phone for calls any more. I don't have the time to just go on and on. I like texting, Twitter, looking at someone's Facebook wall. I learn what I need to know" (2011, p.15).

Turkle concludes that texting introduces a world of "continual partial attention" in which we are constantly predisposed to interruption, and – because the arrival of new information triggers the release of the pleasure hormone dopamine – we learn to desire interruption, and find it almost impossible to ignore new information when it arrives, even when we suspect it to be of little interest (2011, p.161). Consider for a moment how many times you have finished reading a paragraph in a book or magazine only to realise that you had lost concentration midway and have no idea what you have read. When reading print, there is a good chance you will return to the paragraph to reread it. When online, however, there is a better chance that lost concentration will prompt you to click away from the page. Maya Eagleton writes of reading online: "If the text does not interest users immediately, the audience will quickly leave the site in search of more alluring material" (2002, p.23).

It is equally likely, furthermore, that the arrival of an email, tweet, or other form of new information in a parallel channel will have caused the loss of concentration in the first place (Turkle 2011, p.171). That is, distraction is likely to have been a by-product of the skimming nature of the online medium itself. What, then, of art, and other communication forms that require depth, imagination and empathy? Not surprisingly, artists are interpreting, responding to, and intervening in our habitual skimming in many ways. In the cartoon below, Michael Leunig illustrates our expectation of immediate, easy and entertaining communication, and our discomfort vis-à-vis challenging ideas and representations.

[Production Note: This cartoon is not included in this digital copy due to copyright restrictions.]

View from: [Leunig's website](#)

Drawing attention to modern society's general acceleration, a German group called the 'Decelerators' creates what they describe as "speed traps" in town centres, in which pedestrians are timed with a stopwatch as they go about their daily business. People caught covering 50 metres in less than 37 seconds are pulled aside and asked to explain their haste. As 'punishment', the speeding pedestrians are asked to walk the same 50 metres while controlling an awkward turtle marionette (Honoré 2004, p.34):

"It is always a huge success," says Jürgen Adam, a schoolteacher who ran a speed trap in the German city of Ulm. "Most people have not even thought about why they are going so fast. But once we get them talking about speed and time, they are very

interested. They like the idea of slowing down. Some even return later in the day, asking to walk the turtle a second time. They find it so soothing” (ibid).

In *Busking the Silence*, the passing crowd provides an empirical metaphor equivalent to that of the Internet as a skimming stones medium. Hundreds of individuals are seen walking between the musicians and the camera, impervious to both, despite the camera sitting in plain sight on a large tripod. The crowd is networked, together in space, but each person comfortably alone in a world of diminished expectations (Turkle 2011, p.154).

Art curation is also beginning to reflect the blurred logic of skimming stones. Of Hobart’s Museum of Old and New Art (MONA), which is twice the size of New York’s Guggenheim and Tasmania’s foremost tourist attraction, Richard Flanagan asks:

What, for example, is the meaning of juxtaposing an Aboriginal bark painting of a shark with a photograph of a naked man on all fours being mounted by a large dog? Of showing together a Roman bronze of *Leda and the Swan*, a Damien Hirst canvas made of dead flies, a collection of ancient Chinese coins and a skull blinged with blue beetles? In its free-flowing associations, MONA owes as much to the Web as it does to the past, and a visitor doesn’t so much visit MONA as surf it. It is as if the museum in its entirety is the artwork (2013, p.148).

The task for creative journalists, artists and documentarians working with digital media is similar: to conceive of the Net itself as an art space in which time must be reappropriated (Cramerotti 2009, p.104). For the long-form journalist, the world of skimming stones presents a crisis that is both moral and practical. Neither the book nor the literary magazine will disappear soon, but because the brain functions the same both online and off, our collective capacity to communicate slowly and thoughtfully on the Internet will, to an important extent, influence the quality of our social communication and our receptiveness to long-form narrative reportage in other forms. And because literary journalism, like art, is an agent of truth, reflection, enquiry and beauty, its atrophy would signal the loss of more than just words (Sims 1990). Part Two of this thesis examines the possibility of reappropriating time for deep, slow, thoughtful communication in digital space, and argues that digital photo essays provide a subversive logic of efficiency that is capable of speaking beyond appearances – of slowing our habitual skimming and encouraging us to sink to the depths of knowledge, nuance and imagination.

## Part Two

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At dawn and dusk the sunlight in outback Australia creates giants. Shadows of my outstretched fingers are longer than my arms; my head's elongated shadow lies beyond the distance I can throw a stone.

At a polished aluminium table outside a café on Cobar's main street I sit and drink early morning coffee with a Persian friend, Vedad, and my dad, Rick. Dad's home is 550 kilometres further down this same street, in Broken Hill. He describes the horizontal rainbow that sometimes embraces the outback horizon at sunset, which, according to Badger Bates, a local Aboriginal friend and artist, is the rainbow serpent cradling the earth.

I think how our cool lanky shadows remind me of *Timara*, the whimsical spirits of the Arnhem Land dreamtime who were the heroes of my favourite childhood book, *Turramulli the Giant Quinkin*, and I wonder if all religious belief has its basis in some material thing, and if shadow is material at all, or merely an absence.

Vedad says the dry air and diffuse light remind him of Shiraz, where he was born. We are both lost in recollections when Vera arrives, asking for directions between deep breaths, her aged asthmatic lungs heaving beneath a pink cotton T-shirt and the weight of enormous breasts. We invite her to sit and catch her breath, and Vera accepts the invitation. We introduce ourselves and she orders a cappuccino. Vera is 71 and lives in Liverpool, in Sydney's south, but grew up on a sheep station outside

Parkes, in rural NSW, and still has the frank, open nature of a country girl living in the city.

“Iran?” she says, looking at Vedad and nodding as though answering her own question. “Well, look, I don’t mean any offense, but it doesn’t work. Multiculturalism. I live in the middle of it, and it doesn’t work. Too many people, too quickly. Nobody understands anybody. It doesn’t work.”

The previous night we had eaten Chinese food at the local bowling club, where we shared the restaurant with a gregarious gathering of families from Zimbabwe, Tanzania and South Africa. Cobar shire is roughly the size of Tasmania, and home to 5000 people, most of whom work in or around the copper, zinc, gold, lead and silver mines that, together with a small amount of grazing, provide the town its livelihood. We told Vera of our surprise and delight at Cobar’s multiculturalism, and asked her if it wasn’t a good thing to be living at a continental crossroads?

“No,” said Vera, shaking her head. It wasn’t a good thing, and she explained.

It was the Arabs who caused her the most concern. Her grandad was Irish, and if there was tension in Ireland because not everybody went to the same church, she reasoned, it’s no wonder that things go pear shaped in Liverpool, where not everyone shares the same God.

Too many people, too quickly, and there’s no common church, no place where people commune on a weekly basis. No roof big enough to cover a crowd so large, and so diverse. This is how I understood Vera’s complaint. A wheel with more than one hub goes nowhere.

It has little to do with God, who Vera is happy to believe in so long as no unnecessary worship is involved – “I believe in God, I just don’t see the need to tell Him so every week” – and more about feeling comfortable in her own backyard. Having grown up on a sheep station, Vera’s notion of a backyard is pretty big: “They should speak our language, and they should adapt to our way of life. Isn’t that why they came here in the first place, because Australia is better and safer than wherever it is that they came from?”

In 2010, Sydney Archbishop Dr Peter Jenson dedicated his Easter message to the city's "loneliness epidemic". As many as one in four people in Sydney lack a close confidant, he said, and he counselled that people should look to Jesus to help restore their relationships, and to remedy a problem that is both social and spiritual.

For Jenson, loneliness is a symptom of secularism. Others point to materialism, liberal individualism, or religion to understand the same phenomenon. But for those of us who side with Philip Adams and Richard Dawkins in their ongoing quarrel with God, Vera's discomfort with multiculturalism and Jenson's Easter message both signal a paradox that needs consideration: Where, or what, is the secular church? Is it possible for society to jettison the worship function of a church but retain its sense of communion?

(... **Communion** (noun): affinity, fellowship, kinship, friendship, fellow feeling, togetherness, closeness, harmony, understanding, rapport, connection, communication, empathy, accord, unity... )

Cities allow us to live in close proximity to religious, cultural and linguistic 'Others'; however, because all but a handful of Sydney's population is, by definition, an unknown Other of one variety or another, there is no expectation for us to commune with those we don't already know. We celebrate diversity while self-homogenising. We know as much about the Vietnamese of Cabramatta as we do about the Vietnamese of Vietnam, and most of that is mediated to us through the press. Living, thinking, smelling, singing individuals are replaced with symbolic representations of people, stereotypes that can be misleading, corrosive and dangerous. "Too many people, too quickly. And nobody understands anybody..."

Cities are still the locus of innovation and change, but their potential is diminished if difference is kept compartmentalised like different sized nails in a toolbox. Growth, construction and change come, after all, from encounters with the unknown.

I didn't share these ideas with Vera. I didn't have time. She had found a table of attentive listeners and merrily let her cappuccino go cold. Like so many Australians of her generation, she compared recent decades of immigration to the Southern

European migrants of her youth, the Italians and Greeks who Vera described as “more like us”.

We might sooner say that we were more like them, given that much of what we recognise as Anglo-Australian culture has its historical roots in Rome and Athens. The ancient history classes at Katoomba High School in the 1990s gave no mention of Asia or America; we only skimmed the African continent on its Egyptian corner, and Australia before the First Fleet was confined to Aboriginal Studies. Our ancient history was European.

But even if a pale-skinned kid from the Blue Mountains was to concede that the immigrants of the post-war period were ‘more like us’, to say so would avoid any consideration of how *we* have changed in that time. I recently visited a suburb on Adelaide’s northern fringe where my friend’s home was, until a decade ago, surrounded by Italian families who lived on half-acre blocks. Their homes were nestled in a corner, with the rest of the land dedicated to a kitchen garden. Now the children of those first-generation Italian immigrants have sub-divided to build houses where the gardens were, and sold the properties at a healthy profit. The families are wealthier, but have nowhere to grow tomatoes or figs. Things change.

And so do we. Mobile phones, the Internet, iPods, affordable cars, shopping centres, supermarkets and the urban sprawl have all changed ‘us’. Television was the great social ill when I was a kid because it replaced family conversations at the dinner table with 90210. Now most bedrooms have a television, watching a programme together is considered a family activity, and social scientists are more concerned with what Google is doing to our brains. The ‘us’ in the equation has changed.

The Australians who receive new immigrants in Sydney today – with open arms or with scorn – are not the same people who received the immigrants of the post-war period. If Archbishop Jenson is correct, immigrants arrive in a city where one in four people is lonely, where spontaneous conversations on buses is an aberration, and where their neighbours will know them by car but not name. Comparing contemporary Sydney with the Sydney of 1950 is like the trip from Bondi to Mount Druitt. You don’t leave Sydney, but it’s not the same city.

Of course, we had to leave Sydney to meet Vera. People rely on each other for more than anonymity in Cobar's vast open spaces; we look to each other for company.

"If I were an immigrant," I say, "I reckon Cobar would be a good place to land."

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## Chapter Four

### Media Ecology Remediated and Aesthetic Journalism:

#### Questions of Agency

*It's hard to get the news from poems, but men die miserably every day for lack of what is found there.*

**William Carlos Williams**<sup>23</sup>

*In the past, when the life of letters was synonymous with culture, solitude was possible the way it was in cities where you could always, day and night, find the comfort of crowds outside your door. In a suburban age, when the rising waters of electronic culture have made each reader and each writer an island, it may be that we need to be more active in assuring ourselves that a community still exists. I used to distrust creative-writing departments for what seemed to me their artificial safety, just as I distrusted book clubs for treating literature like a cruciferous vegetable that could be choked down only with a spoonful of socializing. As I grope for my own sense of community, I distrust both a little less now. I see the authority of the novel in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as an accident of history – of having no competitors. Now the distance between the author and reader is shrinking. Instead of Olympian figures speaking to the masses below, we have matching diasporas. Readers and writers are united in their need for solitude, in their pursuit of substance in a time of ever-increasing evanescence: in their reach inward, via print, for a way out of loneliness.*

**Jonathan Franzen**<sup>24</sup>

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Above my office, written outside the university's study space for indigenous students, is the Aboriginal word, 'Ngarabaya'. The English translation appears beneath: Listen, think, speak.

The Internet amplifies our senses and allows society to do more with less time, but efficiently skimming across the surface of a media life does not obey what Ngarabaya commands of us. New skills are colliding with old wisdom. This thesis is written in words, and written words – whether printed on paper or cast momentarily on our screens – will continue to provide the foundations for mediated communication; but in Part Two of this thesis I will argue that on the Internet it may be audiovisual

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<sup>23</sup> In Winterson 2002.

<sup>24</sup> Franzen 2007, p.88.

narratives that can best engage a digital audience with life's nuances and complexities. Chapters Five and Six will argue that the poetics of documentary photography provide a natural expression of Ngarabaya on the Internet, especially when married with audio and the human voice, and that the emergence of an audiovisual literary journalism holds moral and professional significance in the context of a world of skimming stones. But before I can arrive at that argument I must first examine a clear theoretical obstacle: the possibility of agency within digital media and, more broadly, within media ecology as a discipline. That is, if the medium is the message, to what extent can a medium be tailored to accommodate communication that is socially sustainable and constructive? How can thoughtful, critical, creative and reflexive production of information aid the project of hospitality and proper distance that Roger Silverstone outlines in *Media Morality*? Might aesthetic journalism serve to slow down communication within a medium that says 'fast'?

This chapter approaches the subject of agency in two ways. The first section provides a re-reading of Marshall McLuhan and Neil Postman that extends their scholarship into the digital era, showing that agency has always been a central concern of media ecology scholarship, but arguing that agency now requires a remediation of old questions and principles; the second section expands on Chapter Three's discussion of digital space to argue the importance of curating digital quiet places akin to galleries, museums, or the pages of a book, where journalism and art can enter into a productive relationship based on the provision of experience as well as information.



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A convenient interruption: as I sat at the keyboard ruminating on how to begin this discussion of agency an email arrived from the long-form narrative ePublication *Atavist*, inviting me to explore the best of “submarine storytelling”. The invitation sits neatly within the metaphor of skimming stones, but more importantly it is also evidence of a nascent pushback against the continual truncation of expression in digital communication. Shortly after I began researching for this thesis I became aware of other theorists and practitioners around the world who were beginning to respond to the ideas and concerns that I have outlined in the previous two chapters. Webpages and mobile applications dedicated to *long-reads* began a practical attempt to preserve a space and time for thoughtful communication in an era of skimming immediacy.<sup>25</sup> Their efforts are encouraging and necessary, because the impractical alternative is to treat our habitual connection to the Net as an addiction that can only be treated by going cold turkey, as Sherry Turkle observes:

The idea of addiction, with its one solution that we know we won’t take, makes us feel hopeless. We have to find a way to live with seductive technology and make it

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<sup>25</sup> It’s important to emphasise that our communication *in* media is as diverse and complex as always. The success of some long-read applications does not disprove the metaphor of the skimming stone, but expand upon it. The two trends are not, and cannot be, mutually exclusive.

work to our purposes. This is hard and will take work. Simple love of technology is not going to help. Nor is a Luddite impulse (Turkle 2011, pp.293-294).

The task that Turkle sets is to re-craft digital media to accommodate our social needs and values; however a traditional reading of media ecology scholarship suggests that such optimism is – to quote Marshall McLuhan – “the numb stance of the technological idiot” (2003, p.31). In a standard reading of McLuhan’s scholarship we find that if the medium is the message, no amount of re-crafting the content will alter the medium’s pervasive effects; technology is the ultimate elixir of our social condition, *determining* the shape, mood and quality of our cultural conversation (Marshall 2000, pp.31-32). Thus Benjamin De Mott asks of McLuhan’s scholarship: “How much can be said for an intellectual vision whose effect is to encourage abdication from all responsibility of mind?” (1967, p.252).

De Mott’s question is important, and the charge of technological determinism is easy to make of McLuhan and Postman because their respective discourses are, in many instances, deterministic. Challenging established thought calls for resolute language, but their work also extends a long tradition of interrogating the complex relationship between technology and society that builds on Paul Watzlawick’s first axiom of communication: one cannot not communicate (in Strate 2004, p.22). From the vocal chord and facial muscles to GPS and Facebook, the technologies that society has at its disposal must mediate the construction of our communication, and this idea is not new. More than a century before McLuhan’s *Understanding Media*, Karl Marx observed that in changing our technology we change our human nature, and he asked:

Is the Iliad possible when the printing press and even printing machines exist? Is it not inevitable that with the emergence of the press, the singing and the telling and the muse cease; that is, the conditions necessary for epic poetry disappear? (in Postman 1987, p.44).

In a similar vein, McLuhan observes that the printing press did not merely encode pre-existing modes of communication onto the page, but provided the necessary conditions for an entirely new form of expression: literature (Logan 2010, p.13). But McLuhan also emphasises that literature did not emerge as a pre-conceived product of technology, but rather through a process in which social conditions, creative potentials and technological limitations converged in constructive conflict (Heyer 2000, p.102). On the nature of another medium – the clock – McLuhan writes that it

provides a metaphor for the homogenisation of natural rhythms and for cultural impatience in industrial societies, but notes that in certain tribal societies of West Africa the clock has nothing to do with punctuality at all, serving instead as an adornment indicative of social rank (McLuhan 2003, p.199). Media ecology thus begins at the intersection of technology and its use. It focuses on the inherent communication biases of a technology not because these biases pre-determine the nature of all associated communication, which would allow us to jettison all moral responsibility for our communication, as De Mott bemoans, but because they influence our perceptions and cultural conversation in ways that commonly go unnoticed (Strate 2004). The relationship between society and technology is in constant flux, and power flows in both directions. In societies where diesel fuel is scarce or expensive relative to income, a tractor is likely to be used collectively and only when manual tools prove insufficient; in rural Australia I have seen tractors driving into town to buy milk. Clearly, as a society changes, so do its relationships to media.

Despite McLuhan's bellicose derision of scholars who fail to recognise technology's mediating effects, his scholarship is always an exploration of the rich relationship between technology and society, and is at pains to avoid any single point of view or to give single-cause explanations (Logan 2010, p.22). In his work on the nature of television, Neil Postman speaks more directly to the question of agency, and in the final pages of his study he urges his readers to consider the following questions:

What is information? Or more precisely, what are information? What are its various forms? What conceptions of intelligence, wisdom and learning does each form insist upon? What conceptions does each form neglect or mock? What are the main psychic effects of each form? What is the relation between information and reason? What is the kind of information that best facilitates thinking? Is there a moral bias to each information form? What does it mean to say that there is too much information? How would one know? What re-definitions of important cultural meanings do new sources, speeds, contexts and forms of information require? These questions, and dozens more like them, are the means through which it might be possible for Americans to begin talking back to their television sets, to use Nicholas Johnson's phrase. For no medium is excessively dangerous if its users understand what its dangers are (Postman 1987, pp.165-166).

Again, these questions are important; but there is one question, or perhaps a line of questioning, that is notably absent. Postman fails to consider how television producers who seek to critically understand their medium can better produce information that

facilitates thinking, because, despite his encouragement of social agency amongst the end-users of media, he insists that television is incompatible with serious, critically constructive discourse (Postman 1987). In this vision, television producers who wish to engage their audience with complex ideas and nuanced debates are best served by changing their chosen medium – perhaps writing an extended essay or producing a radio documentary – and this determinist vision is not limited to the field of media ecology. In his study of freedom in what he describes as an age of distraction, Australian philosopher Damon Young writes:

If we can't escape technology, we can certainly enforce its limits, and our own. We can defer to the noise of YouTube and cable television, or we can seek moments of quiet attention and reflection. We can accept the stress of 24-hour availability, or we can reclaim our own rhythms (2008, p.87).

The desire to escape the tether of digital media is understandable, but as a discourse Young's ideas return to the trope of addiction, offering detox as an alternative strategy to going cold turkey, and the framing of his ideas is thus equally binary: we can flee technology and find respite from distraction, or we can submit to its artificial rhythms. Like Postman, Young fails to consider how we might find moments of quiet attention and reflection *in* a YouTube video that has been artfully produced to that end. Mark Deuze explores this issue through the 1998 film *The Truman Show*, in which the protagonist escapes the condition of his life by walking away from the set and slamming the door behind him. It never occurs to anybody that Truman might stay on the air, creating his own content and message, moulding the media to his own purposes, and – in a media life – this is the only realistic option the protagonist has, because on the other side of that door leaving the film set is another film set; we cannot escape media (Deuze 2011, p.144).

Given that the Net has become an intrinsic part of daily life, of education, news, sociality, entertainment and employment – given, that is, that we live *in* media – we must begin thinking about agency not only in terms of our relationship to media as readers, listeners and viewers, but also in relation to the critical production of digital content and the ways in which it provides the details that mark life with moments of fun, connection, boredom, introspection, anger, superficiality and depth – the emotions and relationships that constitute a meaningful life in media. Postman and McLuhan both show a consistent concern for the moral health of our mediascape, but

their interest is always in how different media can work together to achieve balance. In a televised response to the question, “What now, briefly, is this thing called media ecology?” McLuhan answers:

It means arranging various media to help each other so they won't cancel each other out, to buttress one medium with another. You might say, for example, that radio is a bigger help to literature than television, but television might be a very wonderful aid to teaching languages. And so you can do some things on some media that you cannot do on others. And, therefore, if you watch the whole field, you can prevent this waste that comes by one cancelling the other out (in Strate 2004, p.4).

The ecological study of media in the digital era demands a re-fashioning of old questions and ideas. Digital media remediate the distinctions between image and text, audio and print, because what were media are now reduced and homogenised to binary code. That is, print, radio, cinema, photography, telephone conversations, magazines and television are now the digital content of our mediascape (Strate 2008, p.232). It is no longer enough to seek balance between media, therefore. We must also seek equilibrium *within* media, a task that will require not only a study of “media *as* media” – as Lance Strate defines the discipline of media ecology (2008, p.130, italics in original) – but also a study of content *as* media.

This proposal may be received as the numb stance of a technological idiot; however, although the task appears new, the questions that inform the study of media *as* media, and the study of content *as* media, remain closely aligned. What digital content might best express particular types of information? What relational spaces within our digital mediascape might best facilitate meaningful engagement with life's complexities, surprises and nuances? Additionally, content *as* media introduces a new set of questions into what Lance Strate describes as the uncertain times of our information maelstrom (2008, pp.136-137). Namely, we must begin to interrogate the contested boundaries of media and content, because although the Internet as a medium, or meta-medium, carries its own message, ultimately acting to extend and numb our central nervous system, the message of email arguably varies in nature, however slightly, from that of YouTube or Twitter. The genus is the same, each characterised by its digital composition; but what threshold does a webpage as ubiquitous and formative as Facebook have to pass before it is recognised as a sub-species within the digital family? That is, at what point does digital content become a digital medium in its own right?

Media enter into relationships with other media, and can only be studied and understood in relation to, and through the prism of other media (Bolter et al. 2000, p.65; Deuze 2012). In the context of constant remediation the task of delineating between media and media content in any concrete way is difficult; but for Michael Wesch there is no doubt that digital content can also be digital media:

Today a new medium emerges every time someone creates a new web application. A Flickr here, a Twitter there, and a new way of relating to others emerges, bringing with it new forms of self-awareness – new ways for contemplating one’s self in relation to others (Wesch 2009, p.21).

Social media, as we now think of them in the digital sense, create new forms of expression, or amplify old styles of expression in new ways: tagging, listing, liking, pinning, commenting, tweeting, blogging or vlogging all provide unique ways for us to express ourselves and engage with Others; yet on this issue I nevertheless feel that my reach exceeds my grasp, and in stretching beyond my comfort zone I am wary of the common trap of conflating unique instances of Internet usage with pervasive media effects (Strate 2008, p.137). What does seem clear is this: the Internet is the environment in which our ‘new new media ontologies’ grow, and if anything is truly new in this environment it is the amplified and accelerated nature of change (Deuze 2012). Media logics converge, and fault lines clash or fold over each other (ibid). The best means of interrogating the social sustainability of our mediated world is arguably thus to examine the nuances *within* media, to survey and analyse the rich relationships amongst digital media content, and our relationships to, and within, each. The medium is the message, and the Internet provides the ascendant metaphors for contemporary culture. It is precisely because we cannot escape digital media any more than we can escape the ground beneath us that we are left with the task of working with the media we have, and within them. As Ivan Illich writes, society can invest the world with its meaning to the degree that it masters its tools; but tools will determine the image of society to the degree that we are mastered by them (1973, p.21).

Agency is an ongoing project, and one that lies at the core of media ecology scholarship. Postman writes: “...as I understand the whole point of media ecology, it exists to further our insights into how we stand as human beings, how we are doing morally in the journey we are taking” (in Strate 2004, p.38). What follows in this

thesis is an exploration of how digital media might play better host to complexity, nuance, imagination and empathy in a world of skimming stones, beginning with a further discussion of how to approach digital space.

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In *No sense of place*, Joshua Meyrowitz merges media ecology theory with Erving Goffman's dramaturgical 'situationism' – a sociological approach to the study of communication in everyday social spaces – to argue that new media have undermined the link between established social expectations and physical settings (Meyrowitz 1985). Meyrowitz precedes David Harvey's (later) theoretical mapping of space,<sup>26</sup> but in its own way his study recognises and illustrates the blurred division between the absolute and relational spaces that mediate everyday life. A café no longer defines, or even confines the communication that takes place within its walls. We communicate within a *multimedia* environment. The combination of situationism and medium theory is important because it provides a dual focus on environments as media and on media as environments, arguably making Meyrowitz the first scholar to address what Janet Sternberg describes, with intentional irony, as the internal ecological imbalance between the yin (environments as media) and yang (media as environments) intellectual traditions of media ecology scholarship (Sternberg 2002, p.20).

Meyrowitz suggests that Goffman and McLuhan have complementary weaknesses:

Goffman focuses only on the study of face-to-face interaction and ignores the influence and effects of media on the variables he describes; McLuhan focuses on the effects of media and ignores the structural aspects of face-to-face interaction. These oversights may stem from the traditional view that face-to-face behaviour and mediated communications are completely different types of interaction – real life vs. media (1985, p.4).

As discussed in the previous chapter, the blurring of absolute and relational spaces clouds this traditional differentiation of 'real' and 'virtual', or of 'unmediated' and 'mediated' environments, ultimately rendering each term irrelevant in the hybrid spaces of a media life. If we ask which media foster deep thought and reflection, as Postman encourages us to do, a response that includes the Yin and Yang traditions of media ecology would likely include libraries, galleries, museums, parks, forests,

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<sup>26</sup> David Harvey first described his tripartite division of space in his 1973 book, *Social Justice and the City* (London: Edward Arnold).

beaches, and the printed pages of literature and poetry. Works of opera, theatre and cinema may also be included, as well as the opera houses, theatres and cinemas that house them. This response invites us to think about, and work with a spatial, or environmental understanding of *multimedia* in our search for agency and equilibrium, and this is how ‘multimedia’ should be understood in the arguments that follow.

To illustrate this idea, I would like to describe a recent experience. In a public plaza in Barcelona I watched a young girl, perhaps nine-years old, approach a double-bass player who was dressed in a tuxedo, and standing next to an empty chair. The girl threw a coin into the hat that the busker had placed on the ground. Nodding his head with gratitude, the musician began a melody that I recognised as the final movement of Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony. The girl stood and listened to the movement’s opening chords, and after a short time the man was joined by a cellist, who sat in the empty chair and began accompanying the bass notes. A small troop of musicians carrying string and brass instruments joined the duo and their increased volume and sudden apparition prompted the formation of a growing crowd. People began recording the performance on mobile phones as a parade of musicians carrying trumpets, trombones, bassoons, flutes and percussion instruments continued to emerge from the buildings abutting the plaza to join the band, now an orchestra. The familiar melody grew in tempo and volume. A conductor emerged from the crowd, dressed in casual attire, and began keeping time, and then – on his cue – a small choir began singing the Ode to Joy. The public was transfixed. I watched children climb lampposts and trees to better see the spectacle above adult heads, and saw toddlers on parents’ shoulders laughing and waving their arms, imitating the conductor. The music grew and then subsided to the familiar lull... ta da... ta da... ta da... notes suspended in anticipation of what must follow. And then it happened. The plaza erupted in singing. Voices were everywhere. Choir members had spread throughout the crowd. Those who weren’t singing were astonished, and looked about in amazement, listening to a full, impromptu recital of the Ode to Joy. I wept, and I was not alone. Except that I was alone, because I saw all of this from my study, on YouTube: the video of a Spanish Flash Mob sharing their art, momentarily transforming a public space in Barcelona into a unified public place, and reminding us that such spaces are also social media.

I was reminded of this experience when I read a question that Leonidas Donskis poses to Zygmunt Bauman. Prefacing the question with the observation that in the age of Facebook and Twitter everyone who is connected to the Internet and writes is by that very fact a journalist, Donskis asks:

If we can create the net of social relationships ourselves and participate in the global drama of human consciousness and sensitivity, what is left for journalism as a distinct and separate avocation? (Bauman et al. 2013, p.6).

The Barcelona Flash Mob did not produce journalism, but from the vivid experience that the orchestra provided we can find a cogent answer to Donskis' question, and a starting point for agency *within* the multimedia environment of our digital mediascape, because, with the proliferation and subsequent devaluation of information, art is one thing that journalism has left as a tool for meaningful engagement, and thus as an ongoing moral value. On the power of art, Jeanette Winterson writes:

What art can do is prompt in us authentic desire. By that I mean it can waken us to truths about ourselves and our lives; truths that normally lie suffocated under the pressure of the 24-hour emergency zone called real life. Art can bring us back to consciousness, sometimes quietly, sometimes dramatically, but the responsibility to act on what we find is ours (2002).

The Flash Mob in Barcelona is an important instance of profound communication that questions the nature of society, probes our ways of living together, and – to borrow a phrase from Alfredo Cramerotti – it *informs without informing* (Cramerotti 2009, from the book title). The performance works as an act of communication, or begins to work, because it intervenes in a crowd's experience of public space, transforming a banal evening square in Barcelona into an impromptu concert stage, making the normal strange, and wonderful (Carey 1992, p.24). The orchestra and choir raise the absolute spaces of everyday life to the primary plane of mediation, where face-to-face communication provides the visceral foundations of experience and sensibility upon which conscious relations can be sustained (Silverstone 2007, p.113). And the Flash Mob continues working, even now, because its performance recognises and encompasses the multimedia environment in which we live. The serendipity of Beethoven's Ninth arrested my attention at home, in my study, just as it did for those present in the plaza, and the marvel of its unexpected presence in a banal space still lent the performance its strength, even though I was removed from it, watching from

an equally banal vantage point. Thus its effect was no less profound, and recognition here must extend to the camera operators and sound engineers, those artists doubly hidden within the crowd, who breathed digital life and longevity into the ephemeral performance.

The video re-awakened me to a world beyond myself that was momentary, yet lasting. Manuel Castells and Antonio Damasio explain the scientific basis of my response, and point to its importance, through their discussion of mirror neurons (Castells 2009, p.145). Castells writes:

Mirror neurons, by activating certain neural patterns, appear to play an important role in emotional communication because the same neural networks are activated when I feel fear, and when I see someone else feeling fear, or when I see images of humans feeling fear, or when I watch events evoking fear (ibid).

The role of mirror neurons, together with last chapter's discussion of brain plasticity and McLuhan's theory that a medium's underlying metaphor permeates society beyond the limits of the medium itself, allows me to return to an important idea that I alluded to in the thesis introduction: journalism can enter into a productive collaboration with art to foster an inclination towards meaningful communication across the hybrid spaces of our mediascape. Any communication that awakens us to the possibilities and realities of life is an ally to the type of in-depth, thoughtful communication of which literary journalism is emblematic. Journalists know how to produce engaging reportage, but the larger difficulty is to create public spaces, both online and offline, that foster an inclination towards engagement as a conscious act of communication – quiet places in which it is the world that is spinning, not us, and in which the time we allow each other is sufficient for meaningful, lasting communication to occur. Critical engagement with the world re-enforces an inclination towards further meaningful communication, regardless of whether the engagement takes place online or offline. An unforeseen conversation with a stranger, a helping hand when it is needed, tears to mourn a literary death, laughter at a YouTube video, outrage or bewilderment at the treatment of asylum seekers – that is, moments of attentiveness, conscious and deliberate: these are the emotional spaces of the mind that open doors to long-form narrative journalism.

In his work on aesthetic journalism, Alfredo Cramerotti outlines a parallel and complementary hypothesis. Explaining how journalism might employ aesthetics to inform without informing – Cramerotti writes:

Aesthetics is that process in which we open our sensibility to the diversity of the forms of nature (and manmade environment), and convert them into tangible experience. Taking this as a starting point, my suggestion of a journalism ‘being’ aesthetic takes into account a concept of aesthetics as something other than a state of contemplation. It is rather the capacity of an art form to put our sensibility in motion, and convert what we feel about nature and the human race into a concrete (visual, oral, bodily) experience (2009, p.21).

Cramerotti argues that a transition is occurring in which a concern for truth is moving away from the sphere of news media and towards the territory of art, and he argues that there is consequently an opportunity and social need for artists to assume a witness attitude (2009, pp.103-104). Cramerotti outlines two reasons for this shift. The first is the perceived homogenisation of traditional journalism and the subsequent corporate control of information; the second is a “longing for the authentic” that he associates with time-space compression and virtual identities on the Internet (2009, p.48).<sup>27</sup> Aesthetic journalism is thus a call for artists to work critically across media, both online and offline, to engage people with a plurality of views:

As challenging as it sounds, this is an open invitation to produce investigative works not exclusively for the artistic scene, but also suitable for different communication formats: a partial seize of the broadcasting and publishing space by the artist. [...] I think of an expansion of the range of opportunities beyond galleries, museums, biennials, fairs and residency programmes to initiate a relationship with magazines, television stations (from the local TV network to satellite broadcasters) and radio channels, which often are in search of a ‘fresh eye’ (2009, p.109).

The opportunity that Cramerotti sees for artists also exists for journalists, and the multimedia production of long-form narrative journalism, borrowing from art as Cramerotti calls for artists to borrow from journalism, holds several important advantages for the creation not only of engaging reportage, but also for the production of the necessary spaces within which to appreciate the ideas and stories that reportage conveys. Of course, this vision presents challenges for the journalist, the first of which is to question the role of journalism itself. Traditionally framed as a profession of neutral representation, rather than of intervention, journalism investigates and *presents* the facts as they are known (Carlson 2009, p.130). Outside of opinion

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<sup>27</sup> ‘Authenticity’ as a concept can be highly problematic. See Adorno’s (1973) *The Jargon of Authenticity* for an early, cogent critique of the idea.

columns, and with the exception of certain schools of militant media and advocacy journalism, there is traditionally little space within working paradigms afforded to the journalist for the type of critical social intervention that aesthetic journalism calls for: information provision is enough, and – it must be said – often a social intervention in itself (Carlson 2009, p.130; Coddington 2013; Deuze 2005). What aesthetic journalism requires, however, is a critical view of how information is produced. Cramerotti writes:

If journalism at large can be considered a view of the world (of what happened and its representation), then aesthetics would be the view of the view: a tool to question both the selection of the material delivered, and the specific reasons for why things are selected (2009, p.28).

That is, aesthetic journalists must inform, *and* contribute to quiet spaces of productive ambiguity where their work can be questioned and appreciated. Building on a multimedia approach to digital media, such spaces can be modelled on galleries, museums, theatres, and the pages of literature: creative spaces within our digital mediascape that can be visited. This is how I believe the Internet ought to be approached and understood by aesthetic journalists – as a space no more uniform than a suburb in which supermarkets adjoin bookshops, cafes, galleries and homes. Cities impose a particular logic on the communication that occurs within their boundaries, but within urban spaces strategies arise to share and extend aesthetic experience so that particular places, such as libraries and galleries, come to be associated with particular modes of thought. Artists, in this sense, have always sought agency *within* media, and it is in this sense, too, that digital journalists can benefit from collaboration with the arts. Amidst the insensitivities of adiaphora there is arguably decreasing value in providing information and increasing value in questioning the nature of what is known, not in a post-modern dismissal of truth, but through critical awareness – one of the few productive pathways to truth that society has left (Cramerotti 2009).<sup>28</sup> Flash mobs, graffiti artists like Banksy, cartoonists such as Michael Leunig and buskers such as those featured in *Busking the Silence* are conscious of the social importance of their work. Their interventions are reflexive and deliberate. Alex Sovronsky, the New York based violinist featured in *Busking the Silence*, observes:

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<sup>28</sup> Part Three includes a more detailed treatise on the nature of truth in art and journalism.

I think playing on the street busking is actually really important, because when I'm in the theatre – being also a musician, an actor and a performer – when I do pieces of theatre there's an awareness that comes with knowing that everyone in that theatre is there because they want to be there; they all bought a ticket, they all knew what they were coming to see; they come prepared in some way. And, when I'm busking, I'm catching people in a moment of complete unpreparedness. That music will touch them as much as they let it touch them. When it does enter into them, and creates a positive response, those are the moments that I really love because it's something that was unexpected, from them.

And Mapuche-Chilean accordionist Liber Osorio adds:

I like busking. Street music, especially when it's lively, interrupts people's alienation and grabs their attention for a moment. The people give you money because they appreciate that; and not just the music, but also the fact that you have broken their routine, made their life less monotonous.

Media need not be alienating – all media connect *and* disconnect (Silverstone 2007) – but where there is a danger of slipping into a state of solipsism, art and journalism share the task of awaking society from the private slumbers of habitual solitude, from the indignity of comfort, and of providing a common, critical perspective of how and where the individual fits within the bigger, social picture of a media life. If an inclination towards empathy and imagination can be fostered through creative expression, or even if such expression can act to alleviate the numbing of social emotions associated with habitual use of digital media, then each performance, poem, cartoon or essay that succeeds in touching somebody is a small but important subversion of the dominant logic of our times, a triumph of thought over efficiency. In the following chapter I will begin to outline practical ways in which aesthetic journalists can approach the Internet as a creative space. I discuss the historical affinity between literary journalism and documentary photography, each of which provides an important antecedent and building block for aesthetic journalism, and argue that the emergence of a visual literary journalism holds moral and practical significance, occupying an important middle-ground between the inadequate simplifications of truncated expression, and the incoherence of stories without end.

## Chapter Five

### Writing Beyond The Frame



Stella loves being a doctor for all the usual reasons – the satisfaction of providing immediate, tangible help to people in need; the prestige; the challenge; the dynamic work environment; and the money – but also because her intensive care ward in Medellín, Colombia, is a place where different visions and experiences of the world are in constant collision.

“How does one explain to an illiterate peasant that her adult daughter is brain dead?” she asks. “How do I explain that although her daughter is breathing, and warm, she is no longer capable of living in the absence of machines? How does one explain the concept of brain death to a woman who has never read a book?”

Over dinner, Stella recounts her laboured attempt at explanation. She describes how the woman listened, with little apparent emotional response, how the beeping and murmuring of the medical machinery created a dense silence that weighed on her gut, and how, eventually, stroking her daughter’s forehead, the woman responded.

“Yes. It is the same with the chickens. We kill them, but for a short while after death they appear to be alive.”

At the dinner table Stella sips her wine and smiles, sadly. I imagine her standing in the hospital with that same expression, humbled before the intelligence of a woman whose daily life was as engraved with life and death as her own.

Such is communication. When it works well communication creates belonging, understanding, compassion, empathy, humour and interest; it splashes our life with moments that become stories to share with friends and family. And when it transcends language, technology, class, distance, ideology, belief, and all the other natural and unnatural barriers that exist between peoples, communication enables community.

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In the previous chapter I presented the case of a Flash Mob in Barcelona whose artistic intervention served to question the contemporary meaning of a public square, and whose multimedia approach to *informing without informing* carried its social probing across time and space to a room amongst gum trees in Australia. In this chapter I explore how journalism can serve a comparable social function, connecting people to the realities of a changing world and curating multimedia spaces in which there is sufficient time for meaningful engagement with the world and with each

other. In the current social climate, this is a democratic imperative (Silverstone 2007, p.392). Collective action is not possible in the absence of constructive public discourse that is inclusive of those who are at once like, and yet also unlike ourselves. The Internet can help us to begin this discourse, providing a necessary and useful technological architecture, however the public conversation arguably bears most fruit when it is able to evoke, and return to, the smelly terrain of absolute space (Calhoun 1998, p.392; Silverstone 2007, p.81). Constructive discourse based on deep listening can take place in both digital spaces and smelly spheres, but, in both instances, depth relies on the evocation of life's emotions, and it is the dialectical tension between life across the digital and smelly hemispheres that enables communication to be ethically grounded (Harvey 2006, pp. 147-148).<sup>29</sup>

The task for aesthetic journalism is therefore two-fold: the Other must become present to us in the blurred spaces of our mediascape; and her presence must be actively problematic, for if the Other poses no challenge – if she is ephemeral, and easily avoided – then the public discourse wilts, its roots malnourished in old soil (Calhoun 1992, p.485; Cramerotti 2009). This challenge needn't entail a reinvention of meaningful communication through the bells and whistles of interactive design, but, rather, the conservation and promotion of the many types of thoughtful, conscious conversation with which society is already well acquainted. Literature, for example, has long facilitated an inner communion with complex characters, and from the printed page extended the presence and ideas of Others to the realm of the public imagination, providing the metaphors that give meaning to the events and decisions of public life and informing political decision making (McGuigan 2005). In his work on the public sphere, Jürgen Habermas differentiates between the literary public sphere, which informs the public through affective conversation; and the political public sphere, which is primarily cognitive (in McGuigan 2005, pp.429-430). According to Habermas it is through the literary public sphere that conventional wisdom has historically been challenged (ibid). The arts demand engagement that is both affective and cognitive, and the literary public sphere therefore provides the natural stage for the dissent and dialogic reasoning that democracy requires (McGuigan 2005, p.434). That is, art problematises presumptions, and breathes curiosity and wonder into the banal (Carey 1992, p.24). In his 2007 collection of essays exploring literature's

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<sup>29</sup> This idea is explored in Chapters Six.

formative place across the public and private spheres, Jonathan Franzen speaks with Stanford Professor Shirley Brice Heath about why people read literature. Franzen writes:

In her interviews, Heath uncovered a “wide unanimity” among serious readers that literature ““makes me a better person.”” She hastened to assure me that, rather than straightening them out in a self-help way, “reading serious literature impinges on the embedded circumstances in people’s lives in such a way that they have to deal with them. And, in so dealing, they come to see themselves as deeper and more capable of handling their inability to have a totally predictable life.” [...] With near-unanimity, Heath’s respondents described substantive works of fiction as, she said, “the only places where there was some civic, public hope of coming to grips with the ethical, philosophical and sociopolitical dimensions of life that were elsewhere treated so simplistically.” From *Agamemnon* forward, for example, we’ve been having to deal with the conflict between loyalty to one’s family and loyalty to the state. And strong works of fiction are what refuse to give easy answers to the conflict, to paint things as black and white, good guys versus bad guys (Franzen 2007, pp. 81-82).

Through aesthetics – the excavation of the *why* and the *how* beneath the ‘what’ – art in all its forms is capable of challenging our perceptions and stretching the dimensions of existence, and it is for this reason that Cramerotti argues for an aesthetic approach to journalism, one that in many ways reflects the well-established tradition of ‘literary’, or long-form narrative journalism to which the concerned curiosity of Franzen’s essays belong (Cramerotti 2009; Sims 1990). Like literature and the aforementioned Flash Mob video on YouTube, digital long-form narrative journalism must communicate the world in ways that preserve and extend the types of aesthetic experience that the arts provide, linking us to Others through the contested meanings of their stories, prompting us to commune together, even when we are alone. A necessary precondition of this project is what Cramerotti describes as a “reappropriation of time” (Cramerotti 2009, pp.104-105). Cramerotti writes:

At the moment there is simply not enough [time] to stroll around like a flaneur. All information, any object or experience has to be instantaneously at hand. Our technological default is one of temporal intolerance. [...] Usability experts measure the fractions of a second in which we decide whether the information on the screen is what we are looking for. If we’re dissatisfied, we click further. Serendipity requires a lot of time. [...] With Lev Manovich and other colleagues I argue that we need to invent new ways to interact with information, new ways to represent it, and new ways to make sense of it (ibid).

In this chapter I argue that still photography contains an inherent subversive logic of efficiency that facilitates the reappropriation of time that aesthetic journalism requires – an “achievement of stillness in the midst of chaos” (Saul Bellow in Honoré 2004,

p.199). One of Cramerotti's "new ways" towards thoughtful communication is arguably thus a visual turn in digital long-form narrative journalism.

This idea will appear entirely contradictory vis-à-vis the argument in Chapter Three that the abundance of digital images and their inherent superficiality contributes to a networked individualism in which one's established worldview is reflected and safely contained. This contradiction is further pronounced vis-à-vis Roger Silverstone's argument that a metaphorical shift is needed in the media, from seeing to hearing, in which the Other is heard rather than seen (2007, p.81); however – paradoxically – there is evidence that photography's poetic character can propel this metaphorical shift along its necessary course, because, especially when combined with its blooming capacity for narrative, photography presents a world that is both seen, and *not* seen. At its best, photography makes communication productively difficult, requiring a degree of imagination and empathy, and providing the necessary condition for both: time. In what follows I explore the poetics of photography, discuss documentary photography's historic affinity with long-form narrative journalism, and explain how and why photography provides an important platform for moral agency *within* media – an idea that will be continued into the next chapter.

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Documentary photography grew in the twentieth century out of the novelty of being able to hold time still and observe moments of life in places hitherto unseen (Newton 2009, p.233). The photo essays of documentary photographers were, and are, attempts to reveal aspects of the world or of human nature too nuanced, complex, veiled or commonplace for attention from the news cycle, much like literary essays attempt to express in words that which escapes the daily news (Ritchin 2009, p.146; Marr 2008, p.x). Fred Ritchin defines the documentary photographer in the following way:

There are those who have photographed the stone hitting the water and rejoiced in the camera's ability to freeze the pivotal event in a fractional second. These have been the conventional photojournalists.

Then there are those who focused on the ripples that the force of the stone hitting the water produces, distrusting the event itself but seeing its significance in its impact on people and place. These are more likely to have been the photo essayists, or, more broadly stated, the documentary photographers. When Henri Cartier-Bresson was offered an exclusive ticket to attend the coronation of King George VI in 1936, for example, he would have had a scoop. But by turning it down to focus on the reactions of poor people lining the streets outside, he made some of his most memorable photographs – and did so for *Ce Soir*, a Communist daily. He chose the ripples, not the stone (2009, p.146).

Documentary photography thus shares much with long-form narrative journalism in terms of the formative role that each plays in society's understanding of, and relationship to the Other, and the common concern for faithful, in-depth representation (Campbell 2003, p.83; Alexander 2009, p.62). Additionally, the documentary photographer and long-form narrative journalist both combine reportage with artistry, in an attempt to communicate not only what is seen, but also how it is seen – a requirement that reflects Cramerotti's outline of aesthetic journalism (Cramerotti 2009; Newton 2009, p.236; Joseph 2010, p.10-11). In his definition of literary journalism, Norman Sims writes: "Literary journalism requires immersion reporting, accuracy, careful structuring, and a lot of labor, no matter what medium is used" (2009, p.11). Sims' outline of the craft applies as well to documentary photography as it does to any other form of evidence-and-observation-based expression, and to argue that documentary photography is in fact a form of long-form narrative journalism is therefore no great claim; however, two aspects of photography's digital transformation are remarkable, and help explain photography's burgeoning role as a platform for thoughtful communication on the Internet.

The first is photography's ability to engage with an online audience and hold its attention for sustained periods, as will be discussed shortly. The second is photography's growing capacity to address the criticism, most famously made by Susan Sontag (2008), that photography is incapable of providing context. "Only that which narrates can make us understand," wrote Sontag, and photography, she said, is too static and too idiosyncratic a medium to coherently communicate the complexity and fluidity of places, peoples and events (2008, p.23). The inability of any single image to provide context or narrative remains unchanged, however the marriage of documentary photography with audio storytelling provides a potent form for long-form narrative journalism, and begins to address Sontag's concern.

The human voice embodies what Walter J. Ong describes as "interiority" (in Soukup 2005, p.4). Soukup writes: "For Ong, interiority represents what persons reveal to each other, an individual's self-consciousness, that which makes a claim on another" (ibid). The voice implies and creates a listener; it claims our attention and creates a relationship based not on abstract knowledge *of* somebody, but on an empathic belief *in* that person (Soukup 2005, p.4). Just as a photograph can never fully capture the reality of any given moment, Ong describes the voice as an abstract that cannot fully be contained within a media form. A voice may be recorded and broadcast, but its tone and timbre extend beyond the words that are expressed; beyond concrete knowledge to supposition; beyond what is to what might be.

Importantly, however, the spoken word can also be written, typically as prose, opening with an uppercase letter and ending with a full stop. That is, a voice provides narrative. It tells a story, creates suspense, presents an opinion, or canvasses an idea. In contrast, still photography has neither uppercase letters nor full stops. It is mute, abstract and flawed. Neil Postman writes:

By itself, a photograph cannot deal with the unseen, the remote, the internal, the abstract. It does not speak of "man", only of a man; not of "tree", only of a tree. You cannot produce a photograph of "nature", any more than a photograph of "the sea". You can only photograph a particular fragment of the here-and-now – a cliff of a certain terrain, in a certain condition of light; a wave at a moment in time, from a particular point of view. And just as "nature" and "the sea" cannot be photographed, such larger abstractions as truth, honor, love, falsehood cannot be talked about in the lexicon of pictures (Postman 1987, p.73).

Postman concludes that where the photograph presents the world as object, language gives us the world as idea (ibid); however, it is precisely photography's inability to provide a complete picture that makes the digital photo essay, or audio slideshow, such a potent platform for long-form narrative journalism. The form is necessarily incomplete, but it need not be superficial; indeed, as W.J.T. Mitchell argues, no amount of description adds up to a depiction:

A verbal representation cannot represent – that is, make present – its object in the same way a visual representation can. It may refer to an object, describe it, invoke it, but it can never bring its visual presence before us in the way pictures do. Words can 'cite', but never 'sight' their objects (in Campbell 2003, p.74).

As an art of evocation, photography is akin to poetry, its message both literal and metaphorical. A good photograph relies on what lies outside the frame, drawing on the viewer's imagination to create an image larger than what is visually stated. Hemingway, when challenged to write a story in six words or less, is famously said to have written:

For Sale: baby shoes, never worn (Wood 2009, p.2).

His story is far more than literal, and says more through brevity than it could through elaboration. It involves our imagination, and our empathy. The same is true of iconic images such as Nick Ut's 1972 photograph of nine-year old Kim Phúc, running naked along a Vietnamese road after a Napalm attack. Ut's photograph caused more outrage when published in Western newspapers than hours of relatively context-rich video footage (Sontag 2008, p.18). Photographs give evidence of the world and enable questions to be answered (it was photography that proved that horses gallop with all four hoofs in the air, for example), but, like the timbre of the human voice, photography's innate open-endedness influences its ability to speak to our emotions, prompting outrage or laughter (Bock 2011, p.603). As Van Assche remarks, "that which lies outside of the image can be conceived as a more mental terrain and remains to be explored" (in Curran 2008, pp.146-147). Photography, at its best, not only gives evidence but also, and more importantly, asks questions, opening up meanings and challenging assumptions. At its best, photography is much more than 'object' and can be abstract in ways that Postman does not allow for, as will be discussed further. At its best, photography can be difficult, and – importantly – the

human voice helps photography perform at its best, juxtaposing narrative expression against the frame of a mute moment in time.

In a digital mediascape, photography's poetic quality imbues it with a subversive logic of efficiency. A still photograph is worth a thousand words, but when combined with audio narratives its ability to evoke as well as show lends itself to communication that defies the logic of truncation. Digital photo essays can provide context and coherence yet retain the poetry of photography's non-literality. Tom Kennedy, managing editor of *Washington Post Interactive/Newsweek.com*, asserts that photojournalism is reinventing itself by blending "the best practices from still photojournalism, broadcasting, and independent films" (in Newton 2009, p.240). Kennedy continues:

The Internet permits us to blend still photographs with audio, text, video, and databases to make compelling content that is far richer than print or broadcasting typically deliver. This new world of visual story telling gives us a chance to reinvent the form and to adapt integration of various media types to tell the most compelling possible story (ibid).

An important aspect of the photojournalism that Kennedy describes is that it has evolved with the Internet. It is difficult, arguably impossible to imagine the digital photo essay on any other medium, even though there is nothing to impede such stories from being broadcast on television. Photographers who produce images for digital photo essays enjoy greater freedom to communicate the nuances of a story, because photo editors are less likely to discard the photos that do not cause an immediate reaction, and there is therefore more freedom to produce what John Pilger describes as 'slow' stories that for lack of newsworthiness would not otherwise be published (Bock 2011, pp.610-611; Pilger 1998, p.1).

*One in Eight Million*, a 52-part multimedia series produced for *The New York Times* online throughout 2009, is illustrative of both these points. Collaborating with NYT reporters, staff photographer Todd Heisler produced one story every week for a year. Each story is an intimate, three-minute portrait of a New York resident combining first person soliloquy, ambient sound, and 20 to 30 monochrome photographs. If one wants to know what New York City was like in 2009 it is hard to imagine a more engaging or informative resource, and it is also difficult to imagine how the series could have been produced without the Internet.

The public comments that follow each of the *One in Eight Million* stories are also worthy of reflection. Some of the comments compliment Todd Heisler for his outstanding photography, or are directed to the *New York Times* to thank it for producing the series, but a significant number of comments are addressed directly to the individuals portrayed. Responding to the story of community gardener Mr English, for example, Gail Madden of Lacey, WA, writes:

Great work, Mr. English. I listened to your story after harvesting tomatoes from my own garden. It made me think that it is truly a small world where we are all much more alike than we are different... Keep up the good work Mr. English - you are a treasure (sic).<sup>30</sup>

Such personal messages illustrate engagement, imagination and empathy, and, like all of *One in Eight Million*, they are also evidence of photography's growing ability to communicate literary stories on the Internet, slowly. It is a sign of evocative storytelling when the storytellers – in this case, the photographer and journalists – disappear.

Digital photo essays have also been employed to give context to issues that historically have proved problematic. In June 2010, *Medecins Sans Frontieres* (MSF) began publishing a multimedia report on global malnutrition, produced in collaboration with the *VII* photo agency. 'Starved for Attention: The Story of Global Malnutrition' attempts to address the media's inability to explain the root causes of famine and malnutrition, of which David Campbell writes:

The African food crises of the 1980s fundamentally transformed the academic consensus on the nature of famine. In place of timeworn assumptions about the naturalized occurrence of shortages, famines were recognised as human productions, engendered as much by asymmetrical power relations in the economic, political and social environment as by the continent's ecology. What did not change in this period, however, were the images of African famine (2003, p.69).

On the photographs that emerged from Africa in the 1980s, Campbell continues:

These images portray a particular kind of helplessness that reinforces colonial relations of power. With their focus firmly on women and children, these pictures offer up icons of a feminized and infantilized place, a place that is passive, pathetic, and demanding of help from those with the capacity to intervene (2003, p.70).

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<sup>30</sup> Available at:  
[http://community.nytimes.com/comments/www.nytimes.com/packages/html/nyregion/1-in-8-million/1in8\\_buster\\_english.html](http://community.nytimes.com/comments/www.nytimes.com/packages/html/nyregion/1-in-8-million/1in8_buster_english.html) viewed 11/11/2010

*Starved for Attention* was produced because little has changed since 1980 in terms of media representation of starvation, but also, and more importantly, because two things have changed: organisations like MSF are not only producers of media content, but also publishers of content; and still photographs can be combined with voices, video, music and text to represent and explain the realities of starvation more incisively and ethically than was previously possible. Just as viewers empathise with the subjects of *One in Eight Million*, organisations like MSF employ digital photo essays to challenge traditional media representations of vulnerability and suffering in a form that is engaging for an audience that is geographically distant and socially removed.

Photography's ascendance in such contexts is spurred by empirical evidence that people watch digital photo essays from beginning to end. 'Kingsley's Crossing' is a 21-minute long photo essay about a young man's journey to Europe from his small coastal village in Cameroon. In a 2009 interview with *The Nieman Report*, Brian Storm, executive producer of 'Kingsley's Crossing' for *mediastorm.org*, says that 65 per cent of viewers watch the essay in its entirety, despite its length (Storm, 2009). Such evidence corroborates the assertion made in Chapter Three that the Internet is naturally an audiovisual medium. Jon Palfreman writes:

With the Web, we could be witnessing the most important development in expressive media since the advent of writing. One exciting if disruptive possibility is that under the influence of the young, the Internet will usher in a new era of interactive, audiovisual literacy. Though written words will remain critical to human communication, it's likely that they will no longer dominate in the exchange of news and information (in Knight, 2008, p.119).

Productions such as *Starved For Attention* typically end with an invitation to share the work via social media. These interactive responses are important methods of communication and of extending the work's reach; however interaction does not always aid thoughtful communication, at least not by default. Rather, it can be a distraction, because the decision of whether or not to follow a link momentarily redirects the brain away from the part of the brain responsible for comprehending narrative, and towards the area responsible for executive decision-making – will I click here, or not? (DeStefano & LeFevre 2005, pp.1635-37). The immediacy of online interaction is one of the Net's most unique aspects, and eagerness to deploy it is understandable, as is the attempt to transpose the Net's interactivity onto television and radio programs, and even books. But the lack of haptic interactivity within photo

essays aids their ability to retain an audience's attention and interest. It is OK to comment, digital photo essays seem to say, but first, please listen, and think.

Photo essays thus provide a moment of calm in the maelstrom of digital immediacy, an important step towards the re-appropriation of time that Cramerotti calls for, and equally significant in relation to the multimedia approach to aesthetic journalism that I argue is necessary to facilitate the quiet spaces akin to art galleries, parks and libraries where reflective modes of thinking are facilitated. Recent studies in neuroscience underscore the importance of 'quiet' media. A University of Michigan study, for example, finds that people learn better after a walk in the wilderness than after a walk in a densely built environment, suggesting that processing a barrage of information fatigues the mind (Berman, Jonides & Kaplan 2008, p.1211). Unceasing immediacy forfeits the respite that the brain requires to learn through reflection, and through the transfer of information from working memory to long-term memory, both of which can diminish our capacity to absorb narratives and respond to each other across the hybrid spaces of a media life (ibid).

An important differentiation should therefore be made here between still photography and video. Digital photo essays ostensibly share more with television than with the printed book, however still photography's rhythm is slower than that of the moving image, asking of the viewer that she explore each photograph, scan it, enter into it, and imagine its outer edges. The emergence of digital photo essays<sup>31</sup> has thus prompted a resurfacing of an old division between documentary filmmakers whose work can be split, in broad terms, between the traditions of diegetic and mimetic storytelling (Bock 2011, p.605). Diegetic storytelling tends to favour 'voice of God' style narration that *explains* issues, whereas a mimetic approach relies more heavily on aesthetic use of sound and image to encourage the *interpretation* of a story (ibid). Just as poetry renders language strange, beautiful and problematic, providing insight

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<sup>31</sup> I write "emergence of digital photo essays" with some reservation, partly because the nomenclature is broad and contested, alternately termed 'multimedia video', 'slideshow', 'narrative slideshow', or simply 'video'; and partly because there is no obvious moment in which the long tradition of photo essays as a unique form evolved into what I describe, and distinguish, as digital photo essays. Photo essays have long accompanied long-form narrative journalism, the work of Walker Evans providing an early and seminal example; but digital photo essays embody both the written and visual elements of the pre-digital form – the poetics, and the narrative.

into the *process* of expression, so too can documentary photography be considered an aesthetic insight into the process of seeing, as, in fact, the two words, ‘video’ and ‘photography’ imply. In the documentary tradition, *photography* is not simply that which is seen; it is the aesthetic expression of what is seen, written through the lens of a critical observer.

Of course, the world is flooded with images, and not every photograph is productively difficult; most are not. Photography most successfully engages people with nuance and complexity when it is expanded beyond the purely visual, when it innovates and seeks new forms of aesthetic expression through the marriage of poetry and prose, eyes and ears. Marshall McLuhan observes that a medium is elevated to the level of art when it is superseded, when it becomes the content of another, newer medium, as was the case for photography when it was imbibed into video’s more agile ability to capture light and to reproduce the world in real-time (McLuhan 2003). The newer, better, more contextual provision of visual evidence liberated photography to deal with the abstract world of ideas in ways that neither McLuhan nor Postman directly recognised, partly because photography’s expansion beyond the mute limits of its frame required digital technology. But McLuhan does foresee the possibility of a slow, or ‘cold’<sup>32</sup> photography, where he writes that all social meaning “alters with acceleration, because all patterns of personal and political interdependence change with any acceleration of information” (2003, p.269).

That is, as media change, so does culture, and vice versa (McLuhan 2003, pp.399-410). McLuhan describes photography as a medium that makes statements without syntax; as a “brothel without walls” (referring to photography’s capacity to reproduce people to the “proportions of mass-produced merchandise”); and as a direct cause of “a world of accelerated transience” (McLuhan 2003, pp.267-266). In a mediascape shaped by the forces of immediacy, fragmentation and adiaphora, little has changed; yet the little that *has* changed is important. McLuhan understandably categorises photography as a ‘hot’ medium, a medium that is instantly readable and thus undemanding and uninvolved; however, when elevated to the level of an art whose aesthetic form is at once lyrical and visceral, evocative and clear, easy yet difficult,

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<sup>32</sup> McLuhan places media on a hot-cold spectrum whereby hot media inform quickly and without the need for participation or involvement; and cold media require thought and involvement to decipher the ‘low-definition’ content (McLuhan 2003, pp.39-50)

efficient yet slow, the original categorisation requires rethinking. Photography's effectiveness as a conduit for long-form narrative journalism is precisely its mix of 'hot' and 'cold' characteristics, and as a vehicle for agency *within* media it is therefore significant. Empathic engagement with Others is generally restricted to cold media, such as the telephone – those media that are participatory, involving, and that don't give too much away; however, as already stated, digital participation and interactivity do not always foster empathic engagement, and in the digital mediascape 'click-here-to-comment-or-like' style participation can erode, rather than enhance deep engagement, as Michael Leunig's cartoon of a hiker at the peak of a mountain range neatly illustrates (see Chapter Three).

According to David Natharius, there are two main axioms for visual communication. The first is that the more we know the more we see, implying that meanings multiply when visual impressions are supported by prior or supplementary knowledge; the second is that what is not seen is as important as what is seen, which proposes that the viewer must become critically involved in an image to properly garner meaning from it, asking what is hidden, and sometimes what has been altered (Natharius in Cramerotti 2009, p.71). When photography is combined with audio storytelling, a theatre of the mind opens that extends both of these axioms in significant ways. There is now little of the world or of human nature that has not been photographed, and, just as photography liberated the plastic arts to reveal the world as it is *not* seen, so too does the ubiquity of digital imagery liberate digital photo essays to attempt innovative forms of aesthetic expression that foster deep, empathic engagement with Others, expressing what is known without closing the door to what is not known. The product of this innovation reflects Cramerotti's outline of aesthetic journalism, and in the next chapter I will explore the moral character of this aesthetic journalism. Just as the more we know the more we see, so too can we expect that the more we engage, the more we will hear. Photography's subversive logic of efficiency provides a platform for long-form narrative journalism, and, as a form of digital aesthetic journalism, photography can, I will argue, foster proper distance and hospitality in our mediated relationships with Others. As Roger Silverstone writes: "Appearance must become more than mere appearance. Seeing is not enough. And visibility is only just the beginning" (2007, p.26).

## Chapter Six

### Proper Distance and Aesthetic Journalism – Towards Hearing and Seeing One Another in Media

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Two men approach an escalator rising from a busy pedestrian tunnel in central Sydney. The first man walks awkwardly onto the steps and presses the handrails with the palms of his hands, his fingers splayed upwards. The man is motionless except for his head, which jolts to one side as though emptying water from his ear. Four other people follow behind him before the second man, power walking in a power suit, boards the escalator and clambers past the other pedestrians. He reaches the first man and taps him on the shoulder. 'Excuse me, please.'

Nothing.

The suited man shakes his head and swears under his breath as though to himself, but audible to those of us around him. Within seconds both men are at the top of the escalator. The first man steps onto the peak-hour pavement, his rigid legs moving from the hips, his shoulders alternately facing the direction in which he walks, with skill and resilience, with a body not entirely at his command.

The second man surges past and continues on his way. No looking back.

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How does one mediate the silence of another? What does silence look like on the page? The human condition, our common vulnerability, is larger and more complex than our collective ability to communicate it; and yet we try, because we must. In this final chapter on agency in media I explore what Roger Silverstone describes as proper distance and hospitality in our relationships with Others. Expanding on the ideas presented in the previous chapter I argue that photography can help us hear and that audio can aid our capacity to see. In a mediascape where the image is a ubiquitous part of the social lexicon I argue that audio's ability to puncture clichés and surface truths is an additional and important way of subverting our inclination towards moral blindness, our *adiaphora*, and that digital photo essays can provide a platform for aesthetic journalism and for the possibility of hearing, and hence for proper distance across the hybrid spaces of a media life. Journalists report what is said and what is observable; but reporting what is *not* said, and reflecting on what *cannot* be seen or heard from the journalist's vantage point is less intuitive. Journalism is thus adept at communicating the vulnerability of Others but less inclined to acknowledge the inherent frailty and inevitable imperfection of its representations (Cramerotti 2009; Silverstone 2007). This observation is one of several common threads of critical concern that unite the twin projects of aesthetic journalism and proper distance. The productive relationship between these two projects, the social agency that emerges from each, and the ways in which the twin projects are embodied in digital photo essays provides the subject matter for what follows.

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A poignant example of aesthetic journalism's relationship to proper distance lies flat amongst rural crops in northwest Pakistan, and the example is a useful starting point for defining what is meant by 'proper distance'. In the past decade military drones have killed an estimated 3600 people in northwest Pakistan, including as many as 951 civilians and 200 children (Meyer 2014). According to drone operators, taking a human life, when seen through the pixelated greyscale of a drone's camera, looks like squashing a bug, a description that provides the name for a collaborative art project designed to speak directly to the operators of military drones. *Not A Bug Splat* expands the vision of drone operators beyond what is normally seen – pixelated homes, buildings and crops – to include a massive black and white photograph of a child whose parents were killed in a drone strike (ibid). *Not A Bug Splat* is an open letter that interrogates the moral character of contemporary warfare and questions issues of accountability, mediation, international justice, silence and memory; but connecting and underscoring each of these issues is the project's fundamental subject: distance.

For Roger Silverstone, 'distance' ought not be deemed a material, geographical or social category, but – precisely because the word infers and interrelates each of these – it should be considered a moral category of life in media (2003, pp.473-474). Distance allows or denies speech and determines the quality of our listening – the ability to hear, the expectations for being heard and the willingness to listen. 'Proper', then, is a description and moral evaluation of distance. It can be understood as a synonym for 'correct', as in, 'now is the *proper* time to act', and by extension it can describe and judge something as proper, or improper in relation to social norms and expectations (Silverstone 2003, p.473). Silverstone writes:

Proper distance is the critical notion that implies and involves a search for enough knowledge and understanding of the other person or the other culture to enable responsibility and care, as well as to enable the kind of action that, informed by that understanding, is in turn enabling. We need to be close but not too close, distant, but not too distant (2007, p.172).

The cameras of military drones mediate the world through a cultural lens of *improper* distance, and not simply because the vision they provide is inherently macabre, remote, or incapable of listening and thus also incapable of understanding; but also,

and especially, because there is insufficient insight into these mediating effects, and thus of the moral character of the communication involved (Butler 2010, p.14). Through the lens of the drone the Other is shunned: knowable, but refused hospitality, and excluded from the expectations of *normal* life. For Mexican poet Octavio Paz, this shunned Other is not simply a stranger, but a “Nobody”, of whom he writes:

It would be a mistake to believe that others prevent him from existing. They simply dissimulate his existence and behave as if he did not exist. They nullify him, cancel him out, turn him to nothingness. It is futile for Nobody to talk, to publish books, to paint pictures, to stand on his head. Nobody is the blankness in our looks, the pauses in our conversations, the reserve in our silences. He is the name we always and inevitably forget, the eternal absentee, the guest we never invite, the emptiness we can never fill. He is an omission, and yet he is forever present. He is our secret, our crime, and our remorse. Thus the person who creates Nobody, by denying Somebody’s existence, is also changed into Nobody (1985, pp.45-46).

It is in this sense, too, that the drone embodies improper distance. The drone operator nullifies the subjects that appear to her through the camera and in so doing she, too, is diminished; as I am diminished at this very moment, writing about drone operators and Pakistani orphans of whom I know so little! And so I arrive at the central point, because proper distance is vital precisely because it is unattainable. Proper distance is not a thing to be had or achieved, but a process that is its own goal and reward. Communication is difficult, and we cannot attend to the presence of every person in our media life, mediated or otherwise. And yet, just as inhabitants of dense urban dwellings can choose to know something of their neighbours – or not – and imagine life beyond their suburb – or not – so too can we move towards a moral relationship with Others in the hybrid spaces of a media life. For Max Weber, moral communication requires empathic understanding, or “Verstehen” in the original German, and this in turn requires putting aside one’s own vision of the world and adopting the framework of the Other (in Chang 2008, p.27). Perfect verstehen is impossible, but, as is the case with proper distance, any attempt to apply the idea opens the possibility and likelihood of rich inter-cultural dialogue (ibid). Silverstone writes:

There can, of course, be no reasonable and sustainable expectation that audiences and users as participants in the mediapolis can or should take responsibility for everything they see and hear on television or which they access on the internet. This would be both absurd and crippling. Yet to expect that they should never take any responsibility for what they see and hear in the mediapolis would be equally crippling. News really would then become merely spectacle, and the world would disappear into the realms of fantasy (2007, p.134).

Proper distance is a question of degrees upon the map of our fluctuating moral makeup, a framework for identifying the places where connection is mistaken for closeness, closeness for commitment, and reciprocity for responsibility (Silverstone 2007, p.173). Proper distance builds upon the philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas in which the individual approaches a state of integrity to the degree that she attends to Others and recognises that her power to hear or to shun the Other is also the source of her own vulnerability, because our essential unfathomability makes each of us subject to miscomprehension and adiaphora, even if the consequences of moral blindness are asymmetrically felt and distributed (Butler 2010; Bauman et al. 2013, p.11; Levinas 1998). The Other is thus another person, but she is also more than just ‘another’, as Octavio Paz’s Nobody is more than a mere stranger. For Levinas the Other is both external to oneself and a reflection of oneself, a divine embodiment of one’s own strengths and vulnerabilities, and it is for this reason, and in this tradition, that throughout this thesis I write ‘Other’ with an uppercase.<sup>33</sup> Indeed, Levinas’ philosophy invokes the anthropomorphic tradition of the Greek pantheon in which a culture of hospitality is produced because one can never be sure if an approaching traveller is a man or a God appearing as a man, which accounts for the hospitality that Odysseus encounters on his journey – every Greek *might be* divine, and so every Greek *is* divine (Kapusinski 2008, pp.83-84). Of course, within the framework of Levinas’ philosophy the yardstick for the moral character of Ancient Greek culture would be the ability – or inability, as it were – to show hospitality to the distant Others who commonly became the slaves and subordinates of Greek conquerors.

And media are important here, because Ancient Greece did not have access to any media that might normalise the presence of Others in daily life. Non-Greeks were known *of*, but their presence was an aberration. A smart phone, in contrast, provides instant access to a world of symbolic connection, and Roger Silverstone therefore argues that a healthy civic culture is only possible to the extent that we recognise the

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<sup>33</sup> Simon Critchley notes that Levinas’ philosophy is increasingly influential across academic disciplines, and he laments that interest in his work tends to confine itself to exposition, commentary and – at its worst – homage (2010, p.44). Levinas’ philosophy is incomplete. In his work, and as a public intellectual, he has been accused of being simplistic, racist, hypocritical and naively apolitical, even when and where it was necessary to ground his ethics in a specific political setting (Critchley 2010); but despite its failings, Levinasian philosophy is an important ground upon which a progressive humanism and cosmopolitan culture can stand and grow (ibid).

scope and scale of our mediated interdependence, and to the degree that we successfully interrogate the media's constant role of normalising our own place in the world (2007, pp.7-8). Building on the case of the Afghani blacksmith whose explanation of the allied invasion of Afghanistan was broadcast on BBC radio, and previously quoted in Chapter Three, Roger Silverstone writes:

Notwithstanding the blacksmith's distinctiveness, the mediated world is full of such strangers and such images. Indeed I can reverse the sentence and say, with increasing confidence, that the mediated images of strangers increasingly define what actually constitutes the world (2007, p.4).

In addition to proper distance, and as a precondition for its possibility, Silverstone argues that we must take responsibility for the world and for the mediation of the world, for the absolute and relational spaces of our media life, and this, he says, requires a culture of "hospitality" (2007, p.101, p.133). For Silverstone, hospitality is a right to freedom of speech but also, and more importantly, it is an obligation to listen and to hear (2007, p.136). Hospitality is an ethic of humility and generosity in which the stranger is recognised as Other, and in which the Other is recognised in oneself. It is, says Silverstone, "a primary moment of morality" (Silverstone 2007, p.139). Hospitality, like proper distance, exists on a spectrum across which we encounter the ongoing tension of how best to see, hear and understand one another in the hybrid spaces of a media life.

In the latitudes between adiaphora and unconditional hospitality, aesthetic journalism provides a way of interrogating the constant social choices that confront us in media. Alfredo Cramerotti does not speak directly of hospitality or proper distance in his outline of aesthetic journalism, however his concern for transparency, resonance, respect, responsibility and the necessary, quotidian movement towards a media life that is reflexive and capable of sustaining a critical public sphere provides an important scaffold from which attempts to foster hospitality can be discussed, and attempted. Indeed, the central ideas that Cramerotti employs to explain what aesthetic journalism is, and should be, are also the necessary preconditions for proper distance. These include a focus on media in everyday life (and everyday life in media); a critique of how the everyday is lived, or felt, in relation to affect; the tension between private and public spheres and spaces; and the need for a critical perspective of the world and how we experience it in media.



For Silverstone, media are the “sine qua non of the quotidian”; they provide both the content and framework for everyday life, and the resources and space for thought, judgement and action (2007, p.5). The media are a container for normality, but also – occasionally, and at their best – they are a test for what is acceptable within the bounds of normal life. But because media serve as society’s connective tissue we are blind to the many ways that they frame cultural values, defining, in large part, our notions of what is beautiful, good and worthy, while simultaneously embodying an aesthetic that, precisely because it is ubiquitous, is not recognised as aesthetics at all, but merely considered to *be* the world, to be *normal* (Cramerotti 2009, p.22). Aesthetic journalism is thus a platform upon which “we should artistically ‘process’ our everyday life events, and make art and culture become essential” (Cramerotti 2009, p.29). That is, it is through aesthetic sensibility of everyday experience that the media can open rather than close interpretations of the world.

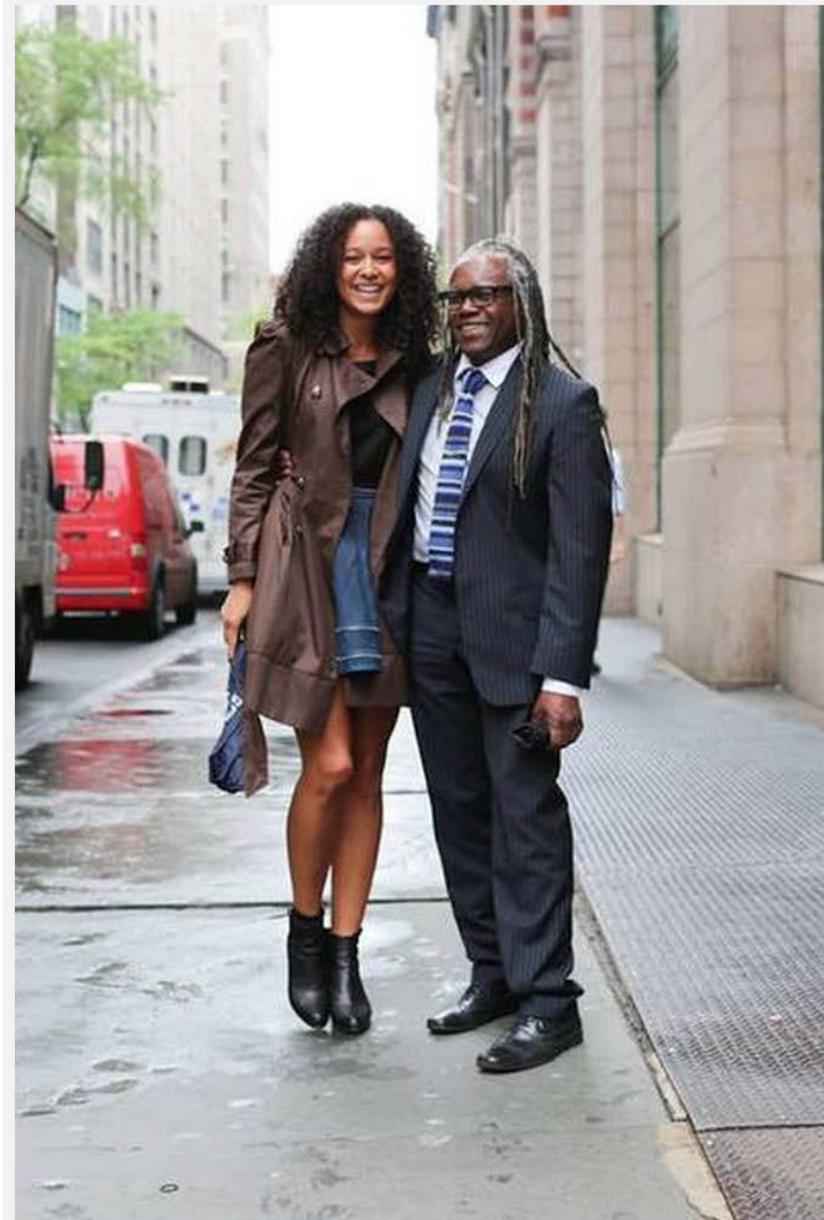
Additionally, it is only at the individual level that hospitality is possible, in part because the institutionalisation of hospitality debilitates the elements of spontaneity and individual will that hospitality requires (Critchley 2010, p.47; Silverstone 2007, p.151), and in part because it is in the banal moments of everyday life that our sensibility is grounded, and in which we are most at home with, and most susceptible to, the world of affect (Silverstone 2007, p.113).

How we experience the world, viscerally, is a vital moral variable of life in media (Silverstone 2007, p.43). Indeed, it is because of affect that communication and

morality are indivisible. If human communication did not exceed the limits of what is necessary for survival, if what we knew and understood of one another were purely rational, with no need or place for lyricism, mischief, humour or reflection, then morality would be a moot issue. In her discussions of Levinasian philosophy and what she calls a “precarious life”, Judith Butler articulates an inversion of this same idea: the origin of language, she says, and the condition of discourse, is the possibility of murder – one’s fear that she might be killed and her anxiety that she may have to kill (2010, p.10). That is, conversation *begins with* affect. So it is that for Silverstone communication is “grounded in a feeling for the world, and in the condition of being in the world among others” (2007, p.43), and that aesthetic journalism is presented as a necessary project precisely because media are places where thought and emotion collide (Cramerotti 2009, p.22). The journalism of artists, writes Cramerotti:

...offers a grasp on actuality relying on the viewer’s sensibility, therefore helping to develop the skills to ask proper questions; the journalistic approach of the artist is geared more towards the ‘effect to be produced’ rather than the ‘fact to be understood’ (ibid).

Fiction, for Cramerotti, is a powerful catalyst for affective experience in media; but he describes fiction as more than fanciful invention: it is a way of undoing the connections between the everyday things and images that constitute what we understand as real, or normal (2009, p.114). Imagination is a tool for understanding documents through feeling as well as thought, and for thinking about the world *that is* in relation to the world that *might be*. A simple way of understanding this idea is to consider the relationship between a news photograph and its caption. Usually a caption provides essential contextual information – the ‘what’, ‘when’, ‘where’ and occasionally the ‘why’ of the photograph; but another approach, more common in documentary photography, is for the caption to open up rather than close down a photograph’s possible meanings. Here is a simple example of the latter, from the popular photo blog, *Humans of New York*:



"When I was little, he'd always let me stand on his feet when we walked in the ocean, because I was so afraid of jellyfish."

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Imagination is vital for proper distance because rational thought alone is a clumsy tool for seeing oneself through the prism of another's worldview, and because without a critical gaze the media's endless normalising of *sameness* (we are normal) and *difference* (they are different) goes unchallenged (Silverstone 2007, pp.19-20). And although hospitality is only possible at the level of the individual, Silverstone

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<sup>34</sup> Available: <http://www.humansofnewyork.com/post/85846672211/when-i-was-little-hed-always-let-me-stand-on>

underscores the need to place everyday choices and actions within the social context of a public sphere that is equipped to challenge the media's greatest failing, which – for him – is its inability to “construct the world in any image other than that of the interest of capital or the state” (2007, p.41). That is, the media's greatest failing is its lack of imagination, and it is a concern for this failure that most clearly unites the scholarship of Silverstone and Cramerotti.

Hospitality requires collaboration, a coming together from multiple directions, and a transaction of faith and vulnerability in which the flows of power are complex. Perspectives collide, and art provides a space where conflict itself can be generative, because art's interest is not merely the collision but the social space around each perspective that shapes its trajectory; it is, as Cramerotti says, “the view of the view” (2009, p.28). In his discussion of imagination and perspective – or what might be called *imaginative perspective* – Silverstone quotes Hannah Arendt, whose philosophy, like Levinas', underpins the project of proper distance:

Imagination alone enables us to see things in their proper perspective, to be strong enough to put that which is too close at a certain distance so that we can see and understand it without bias and prejudice, to be generous enough to bridge abysses of remoteness until we can see and understand everything that is too far away from us as though it were our own affair. This distancing of some things and bridging the abysses to others is part of the dialogue of understanding, for whose purposes direct experience establishes too close a contact and mere knowledge erects artificial barriers. Without this kind of imagination, which actually is understanding, we would never be able to take our bearings in the world. It is the only inner compass we have. We are contemporaries only so far as our understanding reaches (in Silverstone 2007, p.46).

For Silverstone, as for Arendt, the individual is better equipped to ponder a given issue and form opinions about it when she is able to draw ideas from numerous viewpoints (Silverstone 2007, p.47). The media provide a cacophony of perspectives – they are contested spaces – however to an important degree these are homogenised and normalised beneath the banner of a media whose own perspective and agenda remains veiled, and within which innovation, trauma, and the most outrageous and threatening aspects of the world can be safely absorbed and contained (Silverstone 2007, pp. 61-62). One thinks of the way that television exposes society to the harsh realities of war whilst *screening out* the harshness of those realities (Butler 2010, pp.16-17). Imagination is necessary to place oneself in the shoes of a soldier or foreign child, and equally necessary to see that that person's shoes are also placed in

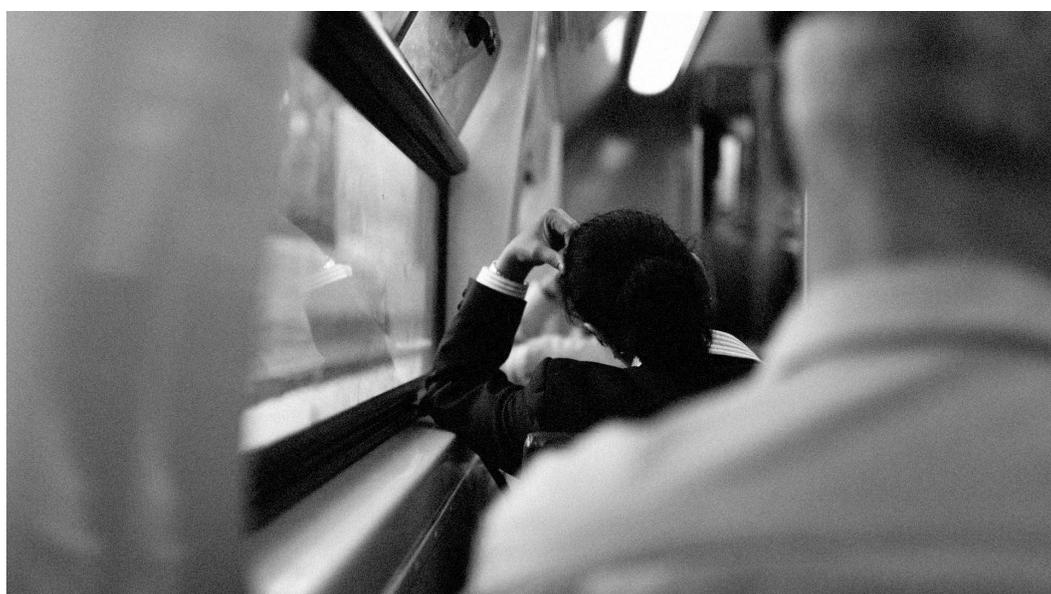
media – in a given society and culture, and in a world in which power is never idle. But imagination is not enough. Aesthetics requires tension, and – like proper distance – aesthetics is not a thing, but a process, a dialectical relationship between an imagined world and a world that falls short of what is imagined. That is, aesthetic journalism is a realm of critical perspective, where ‘critical’ describes a critique of the world, but also, and within that critique, the imaginative ability to place what is seen in the context of what is *not* seen, and to reflect on the tension between what is present and what is absent: “a truly critical social documentary will frame the crime, the trial and the system of justice and its official myths,” writes Allan Sekula (in Curran 2008, p.143).

This is the view of the view restated, and it can also be thought of and visualised mathematically. Narrative always requires a forward motion along an axis; but crossing this narrative axis are multitudes of other axes that provide context and perspective and without which a story cannot approximate proper distance. This relationship between flow and interjection is the narrative dance between complexity and simplicity, nuance and speed, proper distance and improper distance; it is (and looks like) rhythm – a wavelength with peaks and troughs. How much detail and how many divergent arguments can I provide in this thesis, for example, before it is dismissed or abandoned for lack of coherent narrative? Proper distance requires lateral movement along that narrative axis – it requires waveforms with large amplitudes – but an anthropological critique of the journalistic process reveals an active complicity, in which both journalist and subject lack sufficient knowledge of each other’s power, intentions, history and worldview to achieve a collaborative, hospitable relationship, but proceed nevertheless with the shared knowledge of an absence that for the sake of time and convenience must be ignored (Silverstone 2007, p.129). Cramerotti gives a sense of the modern extent of this complicity:

Being in one place and witnessing something (the traditional idea of the reporter) changed into being in many places at the same time and commenting on what happens somewhere else. The pressroom is connected in real-time with online news agencies and services, continually scanned and monitored, and with a number of correspondents in different locations who broadcast live from their video camera (or mobile phone camera)... This ‘globalization’ of news gives the emotion of total contemporality, but tends to destroy context. We do not know anymore in which situation something takes place, since the context is provided not by external (and somehow uncontrollable) elements, but is very much constructed, mediated and delivered to the viewer for consumption (2009, p27).

At its most improper, complicity produces a narrative line that does not waver from its axis, travelling straight from beginning to end, blinkered from the world and from the conditions of its own production. Critical perspective is essential for proper distance because without reference to the infinite space around the production of any given narrative, communication is diminished to a dehumanised, mechanistic account (Hamelink 2000). It is symbolic violence on a grand scale: the people of northwest Pakistan diminished to pixels, or to that ritualised production of Nobodies that we call sound bites (Silverstone 2007, p.2).

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What I am here attempting to make clear is that aesthetic journalism provides an important framework for addressing journalism's hidden complicity, and a methodological approach for media production that *approximates* (by which I mean, 'moves close to') proper distance. Cramerotti writes:

The point is that art is not about *delivering* information; it is about *questioning* that information. Art does not replace the journalistic perspective with a new one, but extends the possibility of understanding the first – where journalism attempts to give answers, art strives to raise questions... A journalistic report, an artwork or a literary narrative would not fill the gap between reality and its representation but reveal it, generating a story with an inner self-critique (2009, pp.29-32, emphasis in the original).

But my interest in the relationship between proper distance and aesthetic journalism goes beyond a satisfaction in their theoretical symmetry. As a methodological approach, aesthetic journalism addresses a paradox in the media life perspective – and in media studies more broadly – vis-à-vis what Mark Deuze describes as “witnessing” – that process of seeing somebody in the context of their environment that is akin to proper distance (Deuze 2014, pers. Comm. 22 April). Witnessing, for Deuze, is technologically facilitated, if not driven, and there is arguably a latent determinism in his work: we can hear, and therefore we will hear, the actuality arriving hand-in-hand with the potential.<sup>35</sup> In my interview with Mark Deuze, he states:

The last couple of years the whole world has witnessed and participated in what the media often call the Arab Spring – uprisings and protest demonstrations all across the Arab world. And those protests and demonstrations are largely influenced and to some extent even enabled by the participation in them from people not actually in the Arab world, re-tweeting, forwarding, setting up Facebook pages, opening up YouTube channels and so on and so forth. Now, this is interesting because if we would see a report on a demonstration in Tunisia on ABC news, it’s a report of two and a half minutes and then the next thing – something that Rupert Murdoch has said and then the weather and that’s it – and that’s the extent of our witnessing, so we’re just consuming that information; however, if we see it on our Facebook newsfeed it’s forwarded from our friends, it’s re-tweeted by people who we know and trust, we participate in it, all of a sudden we become part of the events that impact on people like us on the other side of the world. We’re not consuming anymore. We’re not consuming news about their lives, we’re actually witnesses, we participate (ibid).

Technology is vital because it enables us to see and to hear, but for me, as for Silverstone, witnessing is first and foremost a social act; it is not technology that distinguishes participation from consumption (Silverstone 2003, p.483). The ability to witness, to approximate proper distance in our relations with Others, depends equally upon a social preparedness to do so, and this preparedness must be fostered across the relational and absolute spaces of the world, the digital sphere and the smelly sphere. It is here that aesthetic journalism again proves useful. If society spends too much time in relational space, or fragmented between the smelly and digital hemispheres, witnessing becomes harder, precisely because witnessing, as a social act, *is* hard. Witnessing requires concentration, attentiveness and deliberate thought, and the ease and speed of digital communication can blind us to how hard meaningful communication is. We have the necessary technological conditions for proper

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<sup>35</sup> Mark Deuze’s emphasis on the necessity of human responsibility in media tempers any determinism in his work. He does not directly argue, as Bruno Latour does (1992) that technologies themselves are moral forces, or that we should delegate responsibility to them.

distance, but we must also nurture the less certain, and equally necessary social conditions that witnessing demands – the predisposition to hear Others, the inclination towards openness, and the curation of quiet places that are conducive to reflective and imaginative modes of thought. Proper distance in media requires a culture of listening.

Facebook and Twitter may indeed enable us to witness, and they may foster a participatory culture that moves beyond consumption, as Deuze and others contend;<sup>36</sup> but this is conjecture, because whereas publication in media is easy to measure and analyse, and whereas framing and representation can be studied and observed methodologically through content analysis, the study of reception, hearing and comprehension of what is said and published in media is far more difficult. Theorists are prone to assume and (re)state truths about digital communication that are speech-based, but that fail to encompass a ritualistic understanding of communication that includes equal emphasis on how communication is *heard*. In a paper on journalism as research, for example, Mia Lindgren and Gail Phillips state: “Stories require an audience, and no medium delivers an audience more effectively than the web” (2011, p.80). This statement is quantitatively true, but qualitatively the story is more complicated, and the complication itself is rarely considered. Silverstone consequently argues that Habermas’ idea of the public sphere as a place where we have the right to speak ought to be extended to include new emphasis on the right to be understood (2007, p.103); but like Deuze’s conjecture – and my own – this argument is problematic in media studies, because how is listening observed and measured? And to what extent should changes in comprehension be attributed to changes in media? As theorists we can gain an empirical sense of social understanding through longitudinal studies of empathy, or through neurological assessments of how multitasking affects our capacity to follow and comprehend a story; but the study of listening as a moral category, the analysis of its social quality and character, is like measuring tension by pushing on a string. As David Harvey laments, “try measuring any social relation directly and you always fail” (2006, pp.141-142).

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<sup>36</sup> Henry Jenkins’ (2008) work on convergence culture – which is an important influence for Mark Deuze – and Clay Shirky’s (2008) work on participatory culture provide useful extra reading.

Conjecture is therefore as inevitable as it is necessary. John Perry Barlow posits that meaningful listening is contingent on familiarity, on a shared terminology, language and paradigm (2000, p.9); and James Ettema discusses listening and comprehension in terms of “resonance” – something that is enacted in the processes of message production (2005, p.134). These ideas, and others related to the reception of media, cannot escape the limits of supposition, and of course my response here is bound by the same limitations; but for me it is the dialectical tension between the digital sphere and the smelly sphere, and the way that both can – but don’t necessarily – constitute public space that enables the possibility of witnessing as Deuze describes it. Digital media does allow us to see and hear more – to witness more – than we could in its absence, but that seeing and hearing finds a moral and political grounding when the communication becomes challenging, when our common vulnerability punctures the indignity of routine comfort.

Proper distance requires a relinquishing of control. We cannot, in fact, enter into a conversation with another person, or indeed permit ourselves to be addressed by another, without yielding some control and power to him or her, without rendering ourselves vulnerable in some small but fundamental way (Butler 2010, p.10). In digital media the person who speaks has relatively little control over who the audience is, but precisely because we forfeit control to a generalised Other – including an imagined, future self (Wesch 2009) – we tend to obsessively edit ourselves, and the spaces we inhabit, in ways that shelter us from vulnerability vis-à-vis strangers and strangeness (Deuze 2014, pers. Comm. 22 April). This becomes socially problematic when digital media is used to manage our common vulnerability in smelly media, when we use screens to navigate the complexities and discomforts of city streets and social spaces (ibid). The territory, then, ceases to precede the map. It is the image that precedes the person, the simulation of presence in each other’s lives – or the “symptoms” of presence, as Baudrillard describes it – without the actual presence, or the problematics and politics of life lived in close communion with Others (Baudrillard 2001, p.169). What might connect is used to screen us from difficulty. The faces we might see are effaced from the concern or attention of a disembodied digital community, and this, as Michael Benedikt forecast two decades ago, has direct implications for proper distance, and for the way we imagine and tell the story of life in media:

If instant access to people and information were to become endemic to cyberspace, gone would be the process of progressive revelation inherent in closing the distance between self and object, and gone would be a major armature in the structuring of human narratives: the narrative of travel. Destinations would all be certain, like conclusions foregone. Time and history, narrativity and memorability, the unfolding of situations, the distance between objects of desire and ourselves – the distance, indeed, that creates desire and the whole ontology of eroticism... – would be collapsed, thrown back, to existing in this physical world only, and only as lame, metaphorical constructions, here and there, in that one (in Stallabrass 1995, p.15).

Aesthetic journalism is not a solution; rather, it provides a methodological approach to communication, and to the *production* of communication in particular, that is grounded in a philosophy of listening, in part – and paradoxically – because, as Andrei Siclodi notes in his introduction to Cramerotti's *Aesthetic Journalism*, the aesthetics in question are drawn from the *visual* arts (Cramerotti 2009, p.13, my emphasis). For McLuhan, the effect of radio is visual, the effect of photography is auditory, and art provides immunity to social anaesthetisation and blindness vis-à-vis new media (2003, p.95). This sentence is dense, but the ideas provide an important additional explanation for the success and moral importance of digital photo essays as a form of aesthetic journalism. McLuhan argues that radio extends and ultimately 'numbs' the human ear, and that this loss causes our eyes to compensate for the sensory depletion, thus enhancing our ability to see; photography, in its extension and subsequent 'amputation' of the eye, places increased emphasis on the ear and enhances our ability to hear; and art's interrogation of process provides immunity from numbing and amputation in both cases. To state this more simply, *hearing* photography helps us see what is shown, helps us analyse how it is shown, and helps us to reflect on what is not shown; and photography does the same for the spoken word – each provides lateral motion across the narrative axis of the other.

It must be stated, however, that photo essays do not hold a monopoly on digital aesthetic journalism. Cartoons and animated videos such as those typical of *Symbolia*, a tablet publication that merges comic books and journalism, or *Suspect America*, an animated investigative video produced by The Center for Investigative Reporting in the US,<sup>37</sup> also bring together elements of art and journalism to produce digital

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<sup>37</sup> Available at <http://www.symboliamag.com/> and: <http://cironline.org/reports/animation-suspect-america-2925>

storytelling that is reflective and critical; and *Not a Bug Splat* is a clear example of a photographic installation that has reached a massive audience, started critical conversations, and showed that aesthetic journalism can be produced as multimedia across the smelly and digital spheres.

What these examples have in common with each other, and with digital photo essays, is an approach to digital space as a *creative* space; they are stories that open up the meanings of a media life and allow us to travel towards one another along a narrative arc. As Cramerotti observes, aesthetic journalism must break free of galleries and traditional ‘arts venues’ to inhabit other media spaces, and the most important and most accessible public space we share is the Internet (2009, p.40). Agency in media requires of journalists, and of professional communicators more broadly, that we use the Net as our creative canvas to “create an effect” – an effect that fosters reflection and wonder in the face of life’s complex difficulties, so many of which we share – the global dilemmas that bind us through media – and that we cannot hope to remedy in isolation (Cramerotti 2009, p.22; Deuze 2014, pers. Comm. 22 April).

And now I will return to the moral importance of hearing through photography and seeing through sound, because here we have a framework for working towards an aesthetic experience of media, and towards proper distance. Through photography we can appreciate the silence of another, and recognise that communication, and even speech, cannot be reduced to the mouth. Consider this passage from Vassili Grossman’s *Life and Fate*, for example:

A line is formed at the counter, a line where one can see only the backs of others. A woman awaits her turn: [She] had never thought that the human back could be so expressive, and could convey states of mind in such a penetrating way. Persons approaching the counter had a particular way of craning their neck and their back, their raised shoulders with shoulder blades like springs, which seemed to cry, sob, and scream (in Butler 2010, p.6).

The passage ends with an utterance that has little to do with language in any normal sense; but what we read, and see, are the many moods and exclamations of silence – the rich vocabulary of a human back. The passage produces an image, a scene that is *visualised*. ‘Don’t tell me, show me,’ a teacher will tell her writing students, and this is because understanding, like proper distance, requires movement across multiple planes. To properly understand the Other we must hear and appreciate her silence as

well as her words – what goes unsaid as well as what is expressed – and to properly see the Other we must be able to travel towards her beyond the superficiality of image, towards the joy or grief that an image may express.

Silence, then, is a yardstick for proper distance, but only when it exceeds the two-dimensionality of an image, and challenges its clichés (Rajchman 2000, p.10). Silence in isolation is only a reason or an excuse to ignore the Other, to create another Nobody. And, of course, what most people ‘are’ in media *is* silent. Without the giant image in the field, the orphan in northwest Pakistan has no presence, and no narrative; he is a Nobody, and his presence – or lack thereof – provides no challenge. The indignity of comfort in a troubled world continues undisturbed.

“In America, people can tolerate their images in mirror or photo, but they are made uncomfortable by the recorded sound of their own voices,” writes McLuhan (2003, p.272). Why is this? One explanation comes from Judith Butler, from whose work it can be surmised that an image is comfortable because it can exist without making a claim on another (2010, p.4). We are accustomed to seeing one another in silence, and indeed civil inattention is an important and necessary urban freedom (Goffman 1971, p.385). Images, alone, need not address us. The human voice, however, is a connective tissue that binds the speaker to the listener. We cannot hear a voice – even our own – without relinquishing some power to it, without allowing ourselves to be addressed by that voice, by that person (Butler 2010, p.4).

The human voice complicates the mute medium of still photography and begins to make its processes transparent – there are entire constellations beyond the frame, we realise, and they speak. Photography is further aestheticised<sup>38</sup> through ambient sound and music, and even through playful use of video. A poignant example of this is *Living in the Shadows*, a digital photo essay by photographer David Maurice Smith that explores life in the remote Australian indigenous town of Wilcannia.<sup>39</sup> In the essay’s four-minute duration we see and hear a complex web of thought and possibility, and we also realise that what is seen is a profound glimpse of life that otherwise – and for most Australians – is heard only as a sound bite, and only seen

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<sup>38</sup> It is worth noting the linguistic and philosophical roots of aesthetic and anesthetic. ‘Aestheticised’, in a more McLuhanesque fashion, might better be expressed as *un-anaesthetized*, a creative un-doing of media’s numbing effects.

<sup>39</sup> Available at: <http://oculi.com.au/david-maurice-smith-living-in-the-shadows/>

from behind the window of a car travelling along a highway, if it is seen at all. *Living in the Shadows* is, for me, a digital poetry book. It expands photography beyond the frame, and grounds spoken stories in the abstract possibilities of stillness and silence. It is aesthetic journalism, and it approximates proper distance.

The work of Canadian photographer Larry Towell provides another example of photography that is produced for effect, and through affect.<sup>40</sup> Towell, a member of the Magnum photographic collective, has always produced stories in multimedia, collecting found objects and field-recordings to include in his books and exhibitions. His multimedia approach, which also incorporates original poetry and music, attempts to reveal a personal and honest impression of the world, rather than provide any objective report. Towell's work is an interrogation of the world, not an explanation of what he witnesses, and in this sense his work responds to Roland Barthes' call for art, and photography in particular, to instigate critical conversations about what it portrays (Barthes 2000). In *Camera Lucida* Barthes laments photography's inability to traumatise the viewer, regardless of how gruesome an image might be (ibid). Press photography is contemplated for the duration of a second, and is rarely retained; but digital photo essays do not aim for, or rely on the retention of any single image, because their subject matter is always, to an important degree, *distance*; they interrogate how we see and hear each other in a contested world. At their best digital photo essays achieve what James Joyce calls "aesthetic arrest" – a state in which the mind is elevated above desire or loathing, to where it is possible to see the essence, or "being" of another person (in Wesch 2009, p.27). Photography can enable us to hear silence, and audio enable us to properly see each other in media. That is, at their best, digital photo essays approximate proper distance. An image can bring the world closer to us, to a distance *apparently* within reach, like looking at the world through binoculars; and audio can remind us that what we see is in fact a distorted vision – that what we see is *not* within physical reach, but *is* within symbolic reach.

We have, then, a way of thinking about agency in media, and a way of producing stories that move away from adiaphora and towards proper distance. Dialectical

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<sup>40</sup> See, for example:  
[http://www.magnumphotos.com/C.aspx?VP3=CMS3&VF=MAGO31\\_10\\_VForm&ERID=24KL535NDZ](http://www.magnumphotos.com/C.aspx?VP3=CMS3&VF=MAGO31_10_VForm&ERID=24KL535NDZ)

tensions still exist – between a story’s ability to engage and its provision of context; between our ability to see media and our ability to enjoy it; between truth and truthfulness; between what can be expressed in audiovisual form compared to the agility of the written word; and between the production of art as journalism and journalism as art, and the place of each within academic research – but life itself is tension; it is given meaning and splendour by the inevitability of death. These dialectical tensions are the subject of this thesis’ final chapter: *Reflections*.

## Part Three

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## Reflections

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[A diary entry, 12 October 2012]

This project is self-fulfilling. I write and photograph the lonely crowd, and in doing so I make myself invisible, another ounce of water in the fish tank. My camera serves as a protective shield from three-dimensional interactions, like the ubiquitous white earphones on city streets, the mobile phones and the books.

Three years ago I produced a project about forced displacement in Colombia. For three months I visited peasants living on the outskirts of Colombian cities in constructions of refuse that could never be called houses, yet against all-odds felt like homes. They were damp places, often muddy, but invariably energised with the warmth of a smile, or a tear; with the laughter of children reciting the alphabet from letters painted on charcoal black walls while their parents told stories of limbs being lopped off with chainsaws; with the dignity of a closely shaven chin a mile from running water, or a polished aluminium pot boiling coffee over a wood fire. Always there was warmth, and it filled me with conviction. I worked late into the

night, writing, listening to the conversations of the day, reviewing and editing the photographs. Every day my belief in the project was propelled forward, fortified.

I believe in this project, too. It is easy to point a lens at exotic things and injustices, but here I want to point my lens at local intersections, to study life – my life – and explore the mundane discomfort I feel in the absence of human warmth. I believe in this project, but I do not stay up late working on it. The smiles I see and the voices I hear are too few to nourish my enthusiasm. The project is real, but it is abstract. There is no tangible injustice involved, nobody to blame; only a simmering discontent that goes unnamed.

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*Oppressive language does more than represent violence; it is violence; does more than represent the limits of knowledge; it limits knowledge.*  
**Toni Morrison**<sup>41</sup>

When the weather allows I like to travel to work on a bicycle. The fresh air and the meditative rhythm of my breath and pedal strokes help me to think, and to navigate through theoretical problems and obstacles. But cycling has several problems of its

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<sup>41</sup> From her *Nobel Lecture*, 1993

own, especially in Australia where pedalling to work is still uncommon. Cyclists must obey the same traffic rules as cars, but clearly bicycles are not cars and in practice we cannot behave like drivers. It is often safer and more courteous to cycle through a red light where it is prudent to do so, for example, because the more time a cyclist spends away from cars the faster and safer it is for all parties; but only cyclists understand this, and that's the problem – the reason why in Sydney cyclists are, to a frustrating degree, despised. Cyclists are *almost* pedestrians and we are sometimes *almost* cars, and so we face the difficult task of moving between the laws and institutions of established fields to which we do not properly, or entirely, belong. In the process of producing this thesis I have encountered something similar. The thinker who sojourns across disciplines, searching out new paths and connections, is prone to misunderstandings, to being *misunderstood*, and in retrospect it is not surprising that it is with this sentiment of misunderstanding that this thesis began, even though I was yet to fully appreciate the words' significance when I wrote them:

*There was a feeling of being misunderstood that had little to do with language...*

This thesis is fundamentally about that feeling of being misunderstood, and about working through that feeling towards something more akin to proper distance in our daily communication with Others. It is perhaps ironic, then, that the thesis itself has produced moments of epistemological misunderstanding, although I suspect this is the case with all doctoral theses, or – indeed – with any large creative venture. And as is the case with cycling, the journey for this thesis has been as important as its destination, the former giving meaning to the latter – the medium here, too, very much the message.

It is clear now, and arguably only now, as I reach a conclusion to my journey, that this thesis is about understanding and its opposite, *adiaphora*; that it is about the ways in which photography, and journalism more broadly, can look to art's critical reflexivity as a way of puncturing the pernicious efficiency of *adiaphora*, reminding us that the world is a difficult, contested place, and that mutual comprehension is inherently difficult; and finally it is about approaching the Internet as a space that is public, creative, and amenable to the quiet pensiveness that art, comprehension and proper distance require. The Internet is – or can be – a place to properly see and hear Others

across the entangled routines of a media life, and each approximation of proper distance in media opens the door to further approximations, to the possibility of understanding one another in media and working towards something that is common. This holds true regardless of whether the media in question is smelly, digital, or a combination of both.

Space, it should be remembered, always exists in its absolute, relative and relational forms, just as media is inevitably private *and* public, and just as we are now alone *and* together in media at the same time, all the time (Deuze 2014, pers. Comm. 22 April; Harvey 2006). In a media life it is senseless to differentiate too much between media; but there is nevertheless a critical, ontological difference between living predominately in media's absolute spaces, complete with odours, abrasion, temperature and motion, and living in a world that we understand and experience as predominately relational, where we enjoy the control to curate a perfected version of ourselves and in which the very temptation to do so is addictive (Deuze 2014, pers. Comm. 22 April). In absolute space we are directly vulnerable to the weather; we are more susceptible to the caprice and whimsy of luck and to the actions of Others, and our own actions have more tangible repercussions, rendering us more aware of what Judith Butler describes as a precarious life – the vulnerability that engenders hospitality and proper distance (Butler 2010, p.10). In this thesis I have discussed these ideas in relation to photography and explored the reasons why I believe photography is an important vehicle for an aesthetic approach to telling the true stories of Others in ways that approximates proper distance; but the ideas are applicable across narrative forms and genres, and – indeed – having produced this thesis across many media, including radio, photography, creative writing, a digital installation that combines documentary photography with elements of video art and installation art, a written thesis, and (ideally) a physical art installation, it is now possible and necessary for me to reflect on my journey (which is also my method) and to discuss the above mentioned moments of epistemological misunderstanding in the hope that the path I have forged might leave a trace along which others can move more smoothly.

This final chapter is broken into several sections, each of which explores an unresolved question, or set of related questions. The first deals with truth, the second

discusses understandings of ‘long-form’ in the digital context, and the third discusses storytelling as a methodology, the challenge of producing a multimedia thesis and the possibility of approximating proper distance in academic research.

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## 1. On Truth and Truthfulness

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*Art is a lie that permits us to state the truth.*

**Pablo Picasso**<sup>42</sup>

On 31<sup>st</sup> March 2003, two weeks into the Iraq War, the *Los Angeles Times* published a dramatic photograph across six columns of its front page in which a British soldier directs Iraqi civilians to take cover from a battle on the outskirts of Basra<sup>43</sup>. Several sister newspapers published the photograph before a photo editor at the *Hartford Courant* noticed that at least two civilians appeared twice in the photograph's background. The photographer, Brian Walski, admitted that he had combined elements of two photographs taken in quick succession to create a stronger, composite image<sup>44</sup>. He was immediately fired.

The actions of Brian Walski, and the *Los Angeles Times*' response to them, provide a provocative canvas for a discussion about the reading and understanding of truth in journalism, in art, and in aesthetic journalism, and the gulf between what is possible and what is acceptable practice. In Chapter Four I referred to Alfredo Cramerotti's claim that *truth work* is moving away from the field of journalism and towards the realm of art (Cramerotti 2009), and I have argued that if digital journalism is to approximate proper distance it must strive to provide a view of its own methods of production, to act *truthfully*; but photographic communication has changed since the adoption of digital technologies in ways that are not widely recognised or understood. Central to this change is photography's enhanced ability to communicate beyond the photographic frame, and – indeed – to manipulate the frame itself. Brian Walski lost

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<sup>42</sup> In Meyer 1995, p.7.

<sup>43</sup> This section deals with a particular case study that emerged from the Iraq War in 2003. It is a significant case because of the discussion it opens regarding truth and truthfulness in the digital age, but it is also important to emphasise that similar cases of photo manipulation are scattered throughout photography's history, particularly in the context of war. Many earlier examples can be found in Susan Sontag's *Regarding the pain of Others* (2003), including seminal discussion of earlier cases. Sontag writes: "Not surprisingly, many of the canonical images of early war photography turn out to have been staged, or to have had their subjects tampered with" (2003, p.48).

<sup>44</sup> The composite photograph can be seen here: <http://drypixel.com/54/ethics-in-photojournalism/>

his job because his actions threatened traditional notions of visual truth and jeopardised photojournalism's claim to authenticity, and *Los Angeles Times*' response to this threat can be understood within the framework of paradigm repair, whereby the newspaper sought to protect itself, the journalistic establishment more broadly, and the credibility that is its currency of trade, by ostracising Walski's actions and casting them as an aberration (Carlson 2009).

But this response fails to recognise or interrogate the paradoxes that Walski's photograph presents, and disables a more progressive, reflexive discussion about his actions. The central paradox in Walski's composite image is that it depicts and communicates the reality of what he witnessed more successfully than the two legitimate photographs, taken only seconds apart, that he cobbled together on his laptop to create the false photo. A second paradox is that Walski's photograph has been criticised through the lens of print journalism, with several commentators stating that the composite image is analogous to altering a direct quote (ibid); yet, had Walski been writing and not photographing the battle scene, his narrative depiction of the fraught meeting of military might and civilian vulnerability would not have produced the same ethical concerns that led to his dismissal.

Digital technologies jeopardise photojournalism's claim to authenticity, but they also extend photography's narrative capacity, providing an opportunity to communicate what is seen through the lens, as well as how the photographer sees it. In place of paradigm repair, a more appropriate response would be a shift towards a new visual paradigm that recognises the fragility of objective reporting, and places its emphasis instead on transparency and truthfulness. My intention here is not to justify Walski's actions but to interrogate their meaning, and to consider if his composite photograph could have been produced and published in a more ethical and socially productive way.

In 1999, John Long, chairman of the US National Press Photographers' Association (NPPA) Ethics and Standards Committee, wrote:

One of the major problems we face as photojournalists is the fact that the public is losing faith in us. Our readers and viewers no longer believe everything they see. All images are called into question because the computer has proved that images are malleable, changeable, fluid (cited in Newton 2009, p.239).

The resurgence of doubt vis-à-vis photojournalism should not compel photographers to defend the objectivity of their craft, which itself has long been subject to critique, to the extent that Joan Fontcuberta states that “manipulated photograph” is a redundant term, because photography is, by nature, manipulated (in Meyer 1995, p.12). Rather, photographers should explore more ethically accountable ways of communicating through their work, starting from the adage that knowledge is only possible in the company of doubt. In his seminal book, *After Photography*, Fred Ritchin suggests that digital photographs be treated as hypertexts in which each of a photograph’s corners provide contextual information for the viewer, including a standardised symbol of veracity to assure that no pixels have been moved in the published image (2009).

For Ritchin, the shadow of doubt that digital technologies cast over photojournalism’s claim to authenticity is, potentially, a positive outcome of the digital age, but only if photographers and photo editors are able to shift the dominant paradigm governing photojournalistic practice from realist objectivity, to one of transparency and truthfulness (Carlson 2009; Cunningham 2003). Photography is an imperfect witness, but a witness nevertheless. Its evidence has been crucial in informing global citizens of life’s unfolding dramas, and – occasionally – of prompting people to act. In the absence of post-shutter-release manipulation, photography is read, and should be read, as non-fiction, but photography’s evidence of the world is not objective (Meyer 1995; Ritchin 2009; Sontag 2008, p.23). To clarify what I mean by this, it is helpful to consider an analogous example.

Prior to the US-led invasion of Iraq, 70 per cent of letters sent to *The Tennessean* newspaper were against the imminent war; however, in fear of appearing biased, the newspaper’s editors published pro and anti-war letters in equal measure (Cunningham 2003). This is an example of a simple objective truth (a percentage) being made subjective and misleading through editorial selection. To take the example further, if the editors were to claim that 70 per cent of Americans were against the war, or that 70 per cent of their readership was against the war, the result would be a misreading of objective truth that could only be clarified with further investigation. The proposition might be true, but in itself it is a false extrapolation of the evidence, and this misreading is illustrative of the way photography is read – as true beyond the

specific reality that is captured in one precise spatial and temporal moment. Speaking of a German steel and munitions factory in 1931, Bertolt Brecht remarked to his friend Walter Benjamin that, “less than ever does a simple reproduction of reality tell us anything about reality. A photograph of the Krupp works ... tells us nothing about the conditions and relations within” (in Curran 2008, p.139).

Brecht’s concern with image, reality, context and truthfulness led him to create his epic theatre, in which a series of interruptions obscure the performance to make transparent the mechanisms behind it. The actors play out a script, but they also make the audience aware that they are acting (Brecht 1964). Similarly, the politics of the new journalism is based on deconstructing its own claim to truth by persistently disrupting the taken-for-granted relationships between writers, subjects and readers (Pauly 1990, pp.111-112).<sup>45</sup> Alfredo Cramerotti considers the journalism of Ryszard Kapuscinski to be emblematic of a particularly enlightened approach: “never presenting his findings as the true depiction of reality, but constantly highlighting his partiality (and deficiencies) in the pursuit of truth” (Cramerotti 2009, p.28).

In a transition towards a paradigm of truthfulness, photography would do well to borrow and learn from these traditions. According to Silverstone, the production of truth stems from accuracy and sincerity. “Truthfulness,” he writes, “implies a respect for the truth” (2007, p.159). For photography, this involves not only the production of visual truth in the moment of shutter-release, but also consideration for how the truth is received and read. Expanding on his idea of ‘hyperphotography’, Ritchin writes:

A documentary photograph has always required contextualization to evoke its intended meanings ... The same person crying in a photo could be suffering from dust in an eye or from hearing terrible news. The digital, unlike the analog, easily allows the photograph’s ambiguity to be respected – the first reading of the visual – before it is concretized, while providing hidden amplifying information to confirm and provoke other ideas (2009, p.72).

Howard Becker argues that readers do not expect to spend time deciphering the ambiguities of photographs that appear in daily newspapers and magazines (1995, p.6); but this is not necessarily because such an expectation is unrealistic, but also – or rather – because a critical public that looks beyond surface truths is anathema to

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<sup>45</sup> Here Pauly is referencing the journalism of writers such as Tom Wolfe, Joan Didion, Hunter S. Thompson and Gay Talese, amongst others.

photojournalism's dominant paradigm of objective realism (Carlson 2009; Cunningham 2003; Meyer 1995). A collaborative approach to reporting is an added burden for both journalists and the public, but how else is it possible, asks Ritchin (2009, p.80), to communicate that a tomato that is grown and gassed to look perfect is actually insipid and chalky? How else does one move beyond image to communicate truth, escaping the false comfort of objectivity to create a landscape in which citizens and journalists take responsibility for how our communication shapes a media life?

Walski lost his job because, when judged from within the paradigm of objective realism, he committed the worst of journalistic sins: intentionally misrepresenting reality (Carlson 2009). This assertion, in turn, rests on the belief that a journalist merely captures reality and relays it to the public; that is, on the belief that what the public receives is objective reporting (Carlson 2009, p.130). Within a framework based on truthfulness reality is not perceived as a static commodity to be transported from one place to another, but as an unfolding, conditional narrative. Walski's composite photograph would not be read as an objective fact for public consumption, but as a starting point begging further information.

How conversation might stem from a photograph depends on where it is published. On a digital platform photographers and editors can facilitate the exploration of an image by layering it with print or audio captions, video interviews, and links to other websites, photographs and articles containing further contextual information. The photograph could also be a threshold for a narrative photo essay in which the photographer combines an audio account of what he had seen with other related images. A composite image could be made transparent via an animated reproduction of how the two original photographs come together to create it. Indeed, in the epilogue for *Busking The Silence* I include several composite images of different people walking through a space, but I aestheticise these composites by showing the process of their construction, as can be seen in the images below. When the publication is in a print publication like the *Los Angeles Times* it would also be possible to contextualise a composite image, by making transparent its creation through a caption, or article, and via the omission of Ritchin's aforementioned symbol of veracity. Had this been the case with Walski's image he would have been able to depict the intensity and chaos of the situation that he had photographed more

profoundly and ethically than he was otherwise able to do, and he may not have lost his job.



### **A better photograph?**

If two legitimate photographs are combined into one, is the resulting image 'fictive' if all its elements are factual and the public understands how and why it is created?

Indeed, how Walski created the image is clear, but not the reasons *why* he did it. In a public response to his dismissal, Walski offered the following perspective in an email to former colleagues:

Covering a story on the scale of the war in Iraq, there is a self-imposed pressure to achieve the best possible images. Combining two images or altering an image is something that under any circumstance would never enter my mind, yet on this particular day, under a kind of self-imposed pressure to produce the highest-quality images, [it] did (in Johnston 2003, p.10).

The key element in this statement is the ambiguous notion of ‘quality’. Walski combined two photographs because he knew that the resulting image would more powerfully convey the scene he had photographed. The composite was only one of many photographs that he sent to his editor that day, but, back in the newsroom, it stood out as outstanding, for at least two reasons. Aesthetically, the composite is stronger than its legitimate parents. The juxtaposition of a soldier carrying an automatic weapon, marshalling civilians away from a violent battle, and a father carrying his child, trying to find safe ground, lends the photograph an intensity and power. Critics described the composite as, “the kind of photograph that wins a Pulitzer”, and, “a little more front-page and award worthy” (cited in Carlson, 2009, p.132). For its part, *The Times* labelled Walski the “photographer who was fired last month for combining elements of two photographs to make one *better but fraudulent* photograph” (cited in Carlson 2009, p.132, emphasis added).

As a profession, photojournalism insists that its social function resides in objective reporting; yet its industry awards invariably celebrate aesthetic style, not accuracy (Carlson 2009; Meyer, 1995). Style is central to photography’s ability to make people stop, and it acquires additional value when one recognises that a journalist’s role is not merely to relay reality as faithfully as possible, but to do so in a manner that reaches an audience and arrests the viewer’s attention. *A little more front-page worthy*, in this context, is an ethical intervention in itself (Jordan, 2008, p.161).

Journalists are compelled to communicate, but the ability to do so is sabotaged by a public that is too often rendered deaf and mute by the twin forces of commercialism and individualism (Bauman et al. 2013; Ritchin 2009; Silverstone 2007; Stallabrass 1997). Photographs that attempt to communicate the nuance and complexity of events must therefore compete with advertisements, gossip, and spectacle, producing a

situation in which depth must begin with spectacle (Ritchin 2009; Stallabrass 1997). Of course, Walski was also privileging spectacle over substance when he merged his photographs, but the fact that he was in Iraq, where 32 photojournalists and camerapersons were killed between March 2003 and April 2008 (Carlson 2009, p.134), suggests that his inclination towards spectacle was at least partly inspired by a desire to tell the story, and to have it heard.

Indeed, the second reason why Walski's image was outstanding is that it portrayed an aspect of the three-week-old Iraq War that had not yet been seen. Walski was one of the few photojournalists working in Iraq outside the embedding system controlled by coalition troops (Carlson 2009; Stallabrass 2006). In this sense, his photographs portraying the intersection of military power and civilian bewilderment were arguably less staged and subjective than those of his colleagues, at least until the moment of post-shutter-release manipulation (Stallabrass, 2006).

### **Words and Light**

According to Dean Baquet, managing editor of the *Los Angeles Times*, Walski's composite was akin to journalistic fabrication. It was, he said, like "changing a quote to make it more dramatic" (in Carlson 2009, pp129-130). Other commentators reacted in the same terms: "*news photographs are the equivalent of direct quotations and therefore are sacrosanct*" (in Carlson 2009, p.130, emphasis in original). Such a reaction reflects the paradigm of objectivity and its associated values of accuracy, balance, distance and neutrality (Cunningham 2003); but is a photograph analogous to a direct quote, or does it have more in common with a narrative depiction?

A direct quote is an objective truth. Even when what is said is untrue, the words themselves and the act of speaking them are facts that journalists must not alter; however, like truth, quotes always exist within narratives, and how the quote is used, and the choice to use it at all, are subjective decisions for the journalist to make. A photograph's relationship to truth is similar. When treated merely as fact, the fraught contextual information – structure, composition, and what is excluded from the frame – face the same ethical scrutiny as a print article that fails to recognise its own subjectivity, and in which quotes are used in ways that are less than transparent. A different approach – treating a photograph as a narrative depiction of reality – allows

more room for discussion, for a productive ambiguity based on the photographer's awareness of her own subjectivity, and this holds true for legitimate photographs, and composites.

To speak of a fraudulent paragraph means little. If the paragraph is written, it is real. The question revolves around truth, around fact and fiction, and the onus is on the writer, or photographer, to tell us what she sees, and how she sees it. Walski's composite is not an accurate quote, which is why he was fired, but it is still arguably a factual depiction of what he saw. Had he been writing the scene and not photographing it, his depiction would not have caused a stir, partly because it would not have been given six columns on the front page of a major newspaper. Unfortunately for Walski, he described the scene in a medium that is yet to be properly understood, or employed to its full capacity.

Walski's composite image does not threaten photography's claim to truth as much as it jeopardises the media's claim to objective realism. It presents not only a clash of fact and fiction, of truth and misrepresentation, but also of old and new, a collision of superficial understanding with an unsettling doubt that, tended to thoughtfully, will lead to a more genuine understanding of the world we live in. Composites should not be encouraged; but when two photographs can merge to artfully depict an important reality, we must have the mechanisms to consider how such a photograph can be received. Digital media allow photographers and editors to attend to this dilemma in a way that is truthful, creative, engaging, and respectful, employing artistic methodologies to produce digital journalism that approximates proper distance.

...Could Walski's composite be considered a non-fiction depiction of what happened on the outskirts of Basra that day? The question itself is a productive response to life in media...

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## 2. On ‘Long-form’

I was lucky enough to grow up with stories in the bush – my dad’s tales of petrified castles, dragons, and our friend, the Silver Man, who left messages for me on the bark of scribbly gums. And I grew up with stories written in books, black print on white pages. I learned to focus on the print, but my attentiveness was aided by the white, empty space surrounding the words (Carr 2010, p.64; Eisenstein 2003; Postman 1987). In the bush and in the pages of books I had space; I could follow my own rhythm: stop, think, reflect. Throughout my doctoral candidature I have spoken and written about the possibility of digital long-form journalism, and of the ensuing challenge of retaining the still spaces in a media life that allow for moments of reflection; but the average length of the photo essays that I produce and describe as ‘long-form’ is less than five minutes, leaving me with a feeling of disquiet vis-à-vis the appropriateness of employing descriptive terms for communication that may not fit the description. Multimedia photo-essays are consistently shorter than ‘short-form’ documentary film, for example, and take less time to watch than is required to read a literary essay or non-fiction novel, so where is the ‘long’? What is measured?

In this second reflection I explore the dialectic between superficiality and depth, and I argue that depth, as an abstract category with descriptive and moral value, is a more useful guide than ‘length’ for discerning what has traditionally been described as ‘long-form’; additionally, and on this basis, I argue that ‘aesthetic journalism’ provides a flexible and accurate nomenclature for the deep, or ‘immersive’ journalism that I describe. As a starting point, it is worth returning to the idea of proper distance, and considering that Silverstone’s spatial metaphor for approximating morality in media can also be thought about in relation to communication’s temporality. That is, time is as morally significant in communication as distance, and one cannot be analysed in the absence of the other (Harvey 2006). Aesthetic journalism requires time, energy and emotion – it requires a degree of commitment from the readership or audience – but the amount of time that is committed need not reflect the depth of emotion that a person will experience, or the extent of what Cramerotti describes as journalism’s “effect” (Cramerotti 2009, p.22). It is in this moral sense, too, that digital photo essays provide a subversive logic of efficiency, and, through this subversive logic, achieve what might be called a Goldilocks length: neither too short to exclude

profound responses, nor too long to preclude the engagement with entire narratives that proper distance requires. Earlier in this thesis I referred to the six-word story that Ernest Hemingway is purported to have written on a serviette whilst drinking in a bar with a friend:

For sale: baby shoes, never worn (Wood 2009, p.2).

It is the abstract quality of evocation that casts ambiguity on what may be understood as ‘long-form’, and this is especially true in the digital mediascape. Multimedia photo-essays are necessarily incomplete narratives; they open up a story’s possible meanings, and they rarely provide closure. So I ask: could Hemingway’s very short story ever be considered long-form? I suspect we could only answer ‘yes’ if we allow for a narrative to inhabit the immense white space surrounding the six words, and, if we allow for such extreme ambiguity, where narrative is not only long-form, but infinite, is this morally satisfactory?

Surprisingly little has been written to provide a working definition of ‘long-form’, perhaps because the meaning of such a descriptive category appears self-evident. In his work on book-length journalism, however, Matthew Ricketson (2012, pp.219-221) provides a list of six constitutive elements for long-form journalism: the genre deals with actual people and events and is concerned with contemporary issues; it is extensively researched; it is produced with a narrative approach, as opposed to the expository approach typical of hard news; it contains a range of authorial voices; explores the underlying meaning of events and issues; and it impacts significantly on its audience or readership.

This definition is useful, and I do not wish to stray from Ricketson’s criterion; rather, I want to locate it within the contemporary mediascape to illustrate that the substance of what is described as long-form journalism, and what others have described as literary journalism (Sims 1984), creative non-fiction (Gutkind 2005), or reportage (Hartsock 2000, p.169), is arguably shifting in both form and significance. To reduce my argument to its most basic, digital long-form is not about reaching a word-count, but about reaching an audience, and not only reaching an audience *technically*, but also, and more importantly, engaging the audience intellectually and emotionally. ‘Long’ describes the depth of the communicative process, rather than its duration or

material size. Digital long-form is communication that causes the metaphorical skimming stones to sink, however briefly, and this, I argue, is a difficult but necessary social transgression – a transgression that shifts digital long-form’s definition from a merely descriptive term to a moral category of communication.

Digital long-form journalism, in the moral sense, is communication that dissolves the solipsistic mirror of a media life to provide an informed platform for mediated Others and an illuminated pathway to the great questions of human existence (Deuze 2011, p.137; Livingstone 2007, p.16; Ricketson 2012, p.229). In substance this moral understanding of long-form journalism is an approximation of proper distance, and in form it reflects Cramerotti’s aesthetic journalism. Working within this moral definition, Hemingway’s very short story cannot be considered long-form – it neither informs nor enlightens; but it does satisfy the other condition of long-form, inviting questions stemming from the recognition of an-Other, and from our innate curiosity and vulnerability towards her based on what we *don’t* know (Silverstone 2003, p.472).

In her Nobel Prize for Literature acceptance speech, Polish poet Wislawa Szymborska said she greatly values the phrase, ‘I don’t know’: “It’s small, but it flies on mighty wings. It expands our lives to include the spaces within us as well as those outer expanses in which our tiny Earth hangs suspended” (Szymborska, 1996). Szymborska’s veneration of curiosity and mystery extends the philosophical tradition that Emmanuel Levinas distils in the concept of vulnerability, the knowledge that something precedes us (Silverstone 2003, p.472). Roger Silverstone writes:

There is something out there that in no way can be held or contained or even understood fully. It is this recognition that makes us human, because through it we see our limits and we gain a measure of our strengths and weaknesses. In such acknowledgement we can come to terms with the reality of our doubts and desires, and in recognizing this reality, we can claim our humanity; the painful acceptance of our vulnerability (ibid).

For Silverstone (2003, 2007), as well as for the arguments presented here, the concepts of vulnerability and infinity are closely tied, and he argues that an awareness of the open-ended, unknowable aspects of all narratives is essential for proper distance. A social definition of long-form journalism might therefore begin with the extent to which a narrative opens to the reader the infinite white space surrounding

the text, and this holds true for aesthetic journalism. This is not to devalue the scientific pursuit of knowledge, or journalism's obligation to publicly share and enhance that pursuit, but simply to acknowledge the limitations of such a value vis-à-vis journalism's increasing speeds of production and consumption and the subsequent reduction of ideas to the binaries of true and false, good and evil, near and far (Ricketson 2012, p.218); and it also re-emphasises the dynamic nature of communication, in which the listener's role is active (Clarke 2012; Husband 2009, p.441).

Social researcher Hugh Mackay writes eloquently on the significance of listening:

Deep listening requires *courage*. In fact listening is one of the most psychologically courageous things we ever do in our normal personal relationships simply because listening – *real* listening – involves seriously entertaining the ideas of the other person. ... Listening is an act of great courage, because when we listen, we make ourselves vulnerable (in Clarke 2012, p.71, emphasis in original).

The facilitation of deep listening is at the centre of digital long-form's social *meaning*; however it is the fraught nature of contemporary listening, as portrayed in the previously mentioned Danish art installation *Recoil*, in which a story can only be heard if the viewer shouts into a microphone (see Chapter Two), and commented upon further, below, by novelist and essayist Jonathan Franzen, that also imbues digital long-form with its moral character. Franzen writes:

The novelist has more and more to say to readers who have less and less time to read: Where to find the energy to engage with a culture in crisis when the crisis consists in the impossibility of engaging with the culture? (2007, p.65).

And he continues:

Here, indeed, we are up against what truly seems like the obsolescence of serious art in general. Imagine that human existence is defined by an Ache: the Ache of our not being, each of us, the center of the universe; of our desires forever outnumbering our means of satisfying them. If we see religion and art as the historically preferred methods of coming to terms with this Ache, then what happens to art when our technological and economic systems and even our commercialised religions become sufficiently sophisticated to make each of us the center of our own universe of choices and gratifications? (2007, p.70).

Digital long-form journalism can be deemed moral to the extent that it transgresses social expectations for the common-good, but how does it transgress? Economically, the case is relatively straightforward:

The consumer economy loves a product that sells at a premium, wears out quickly or is susceptible to regular improvement, and offers with each improvement some marginal gain in usefulness. To an economy like this, news that stays news is not merely an inferior product; it's an *antithetical* product. A classic work of literature is inexpensive, infinitely reusable, and worst of all, unimprovable (Franzen 2007, pp.63-64).

But digital long-form journalism is not merely economically subversive (or economically tenuous); it transgresses the expectations of hyper-connectivity by delving into the fathoms of human experience, suspending social fragmentation and creating the conditions for deep listening. In this sense, and in the tradition of Marshall McLuhan, the content of the voice could be considered less important than the act of listening that it provokes (Couldry 2009, p.579); but as a journalist I must also argue that communication that fosters deep listening based not only on how the world might be, but also on the reality of how the world is, established through journalistic method, is a necessary ingredient for civic participation in public life (Parisier 2011, p.58). In a world of skimming stones, a moment of quiet depth to reflect on the state of things is a social transgression, and in a world in which hyper-connectivity to networked devices corrodes the bonds of social connection, transgression becomes the fundamental moral injunction of society (Zizek 2009, p.44). That is, digital long-form journalism does not transgress established social laws, but rather acts to alert society of the need to re-claim and conserve that which is common – social, civic and public spaces (both physical and mediated, smelly and digital) – and it must, by definition, achieve this through the medium whose logic is responsible for the fragmentation and privatisation of all that must be reclaimed.

Whilst producing the radio documentary #City#Life I spoke with Australian taxi driver Ben Anderson, who commented that prior to the ubiquitous presence of smart phones on city streets he could approach any crowded bus stop and quickly read from people's body language to see who was in a rush, and thus likely to pay his taxi fare rather than wait for the bus. Now, he says, everybody at city bus stops assume the same posture, each of us peering down at the phone in our hands. One medium swallows another, and, for those of us holding the phones, the changes in what and how we communicate in public spaces remain largely invisible. Ben's observation is significant when thinking about nomenclature. In many cases the term aesthetic journalism can be used interchangeably with literary journalism, long-form narrative journalism or reportage, and Cramerotti describes the writing of journalist Ryszard

Kapuscinski and the photography of Walker Evans as antecedents to, and examples of, aesthetic journalism (Cramerotti 2009); but where aesthetic journalism differs (or often does differ) from long-form narrative journalism is in its emphasis on form. Aesthetic journalism makes the medium itself a visible part of the communication; it provides a *view of the view*, making the medium and its mediation of reality an active ingredient in the story. The challenge of making media a visible part of life, of making mediation itself the focus of necessary attention, is critical (Deuze 2012); but in the context of adiaphora it is equally important to facilitate communication that is deep and direct. Many literary journalists attempt to minimise their authorial presence, avoiding obvious symbolism and attempting instead to create an experience that is not undone by an awareness of the constructed artifice (Maguire 2011, p.8). To approximate proper distance, the aesthetic journalist must go further, drawing the audience's attention to the mediating effects of the medium whilst also assuring that the medium does not distract the public's attention away from the story at hand – a difficult balancing act. Indeed, for Bolter and Grusin these two approaches to media production are opposites (2000). When the observer ignores the medium and looks directly to the subject, the journalist works in a manner of *transparent immediacy*; and when the observer looks at the medium, instead of through it, the journalist employs *hypermediacy* (Bolter et al. 2000). Proper distance requires a combination of hypermediacy and transparent immediacy, and so does aesthetic journalism. A story must be felt as well as understood, and it must be understood in the context of the frame's inability to capture the entire story, evoking the white space that surrounds the narrative, and this is difficult. Matthew Ricketson writes:

It is well understood that poets, from Shakespeare to Haiku writers, can be profound in very few words but journalists, with few exceptions, are not poets – they hear not a muse but an editor's bark – and journalism is not poetry (2012, p.218).

In the context of our fragmented digital environment, this needs to change, and photography provides a poetic vehicle for long-form narrative journalism's aesthetic turn. Engagement with digital long-form journalism need not be arduous or time-consuming (and it need not be photographic in form), but without poetics what digital journalism is left with is hard news, a form invented and refined in an epoch of information scarcity, and a genre that is dreadful at conveying emotion (ibid).

To feel, one must listen, and the difference between ‘hearing’ and ‘listening’, writes Hugh Mackay, is as vast as either standing at the ocean’s edge, or diving right in (in Clarke 2012, p.71). Most of our media life is (necessarily) spent at the ocean’s edge, however the social role of aesthetic journalism is to ensure that society is not confined to the margins of experience, that life retains space within it for the stories of Others, and, perhaps most importantly, that mediated connection fosters a cultural inclination towards direct interaction (Parisier 2011, p.60). If a photo-essay, feature article or poem prompts an intellectual or emotional response to the true stories of Others; if it prompts a moment of reflective repose, its length is inconsequential. It is the response that opens the possibility for digital journalism to be long-form, and each response is a transgression that furthers the likelihood – culturally and neurologically – of further transgressions. It is the questions that emerge from a story that make journalism long-form; it is the reality that lies outside the frame, in the rich white space that each of us brings to the story, if only we slow down and listen.

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### 3. On producing a Multimedia Thesis

Every medium has requirements, protocols and creative limitations. Multimedia journalist David Isay comments that working in print is like working in one dimension, working in radio is like working in two dimensions, and the inclusion of visual material adds a third dimension (in Maguire 2011, pp.13-14). In radio, for example, a script needs to read well *and* sound good. This is the basic requirement of audio storytelling. The script provides a narrative, and the sound's tone, timbre and rhythm traverse the narrative axis to provide the white space and context that make radio such an intimate, evocative medium (Maguire 2011). Communicating this thesis in different ways, reflexively exploring the ideas across different media, has led me to think about academic writing through a similar, storytelling prism, and to see this written thesis as one way amongst many of expressing ideas and knowledge; and, given that the medium is the message – at least in a metaphorical sense – I have come to ask how academic research can approximate proper distance in a media life. Until now I have focused on the challenges for journalism, photography and art vis-à-vis the need to foster understanding in a mediated world; but the arguments I have made are equally applicable to communication in the academic context. Here, in this final reflection, I consider the media I have employed to produce this thesis, and how each medium influences the ways in which knowledge is produced and received. Much of this reflection should be read as the opening words of a longer conversation, rather than closing comments or thoughts, and the reflection can also be read as a manifesto, of sorts, for the academia to which I hope to contribute.

Leonidas Donskis writes that the story of knowledge is in search of new sensibilities, new forms of acting in a manner that enhances understanding, social critique and self-interpretation (Bauman et al. 2013, p.6). If philosophy, literature and journalism move closer together, Donskis writes, they will survive and become more important than ever. “But if they grow further apart, we will all become barbarians” (ibid).

How can art, philosophy and journalism move together? What core principles do they share? And what obstructs their convergence? Each of these questions is a potential thesis in its own right, and they are not questions that I asked in my introduction, or when I commenced my doctorate; but they are questions that have, at different times, yelled out at me, begging for attention, and their importance is clear as I look forward.

Increasingly, I see myself working in the academic field, but working in the field as a journalist, or with what Pierre Bourdieu describes as the *habitus* of a journalist (Bourdieu et al. 1992, pp.118-119); and that, of course, is only part of the story, because my work as an academic also informs my work as a journalist, and in both journalism and academia I attempt to instil the unquiet irreverence of art.

Before continuing I should first provide a brief explanation of Pierre Bourdieu's terms, 'field' and 'habitus', which together provide a method for analysing social relationships in, and across, specific settings. For Bourdieu, *field* is both a method and a thing. As a method, the field is a way of constructing and understanding social objects according to the relationships between them (Bourdieu 2005, p.30). If we envisage society as a machine, and ask whether the parts of the machine define the whole, or whether the machine defines the parts, field theory responds that it is the relationships within the whole that define both the parts and the machine (Nash 2009, pers. Comm. 27 March). The machine as a metaphor also illustrates the field as thing: a working space made up of and defined by the relationships that operate within it, which in turn are defined by the economic and social conditions that the parts experience within the machine (Bourdieu et al. 1992, p.105). The relationships, expectations and 'rules' within the machine are specific to it. An internal combustion engine does not work the same way as a computer, because its parts do not obey the same 'rules', just as producing a story for radio does not obey the same rules as producing that same story for an academic journal, because the expectations and protocols for how knowledge is produced and shared in each field are different.

Individuals regulate behaviour within a field without consciously obeying rules because of our learned and evolving place within it, or *habitus* (Swartz 1997, p.95). Habitus is imbued with varying degrees of power and authority,<sup>46</sup> which inform an individual's every action and reaction within a field (Bourdieu et al. 1992, pp.118-119). Habitus therefore describes how individuals act and relate according to their place within the field, just as the field is constructed according to the relationships between the individuals within it (Kenway & McLeod 2004).

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<sup>46</sup> Bourdieu analyses power and authority in terms of capital, which he separates into four categories: economic, cultural, social and symbolic (Bourdieu et al. 1992, pp.118-119).

Together, field and habitus provide a way of analysing cultural processes, and for recognising cultural production in terms of dynamic relationships rather than outcomes (Niblock 2012, p.502). This is useful when examining situations in which the activities of one field take place within the context of another, such as journalism research or journalism education, and this is especially so when fields clash along epistemological fault-lines, producing misunderstandings and, ipso facto, the necessary conditions for new knowledge (Niblock 2012, p.503; Rajchman 2000). That is, knowledge grows most effectively in the places where the world proves at odds with itself, in the peculiar zone that Gilles Deleuze describes as “the unthought” – an unstable territory where fields clash and new material is thrust to the surface, breaking old ground, challenging beliefs and propelling facts into the vivid realm of unresolved story (in Rajchman 2000, p.115).

Journalism research is inherently interdisciplinary, outward looking and problematic, working as it does on ground that is not necessarily its own, investigating life and telling stories that need not be *about* journalism (Niblock 2012, p.498). And, just as an earthquake is felt most where shifting tectonic plates collide or pull apart, at the intersections of geological areas, so too are tensions most volatile at the intersections of cultural fields (Bourdieu et al. 1992). That is, tensions exist not only at points of difference, but also – and especially – along areas of convergence. Academia, art and journalism share a claim to knowledge, to the production of culture and thought, and this production occurs on volatile ground.

Knowledge is everywhere. It is found and shared in journals, lecture theatres and conferences, and it is equally found in conversations on the street, in graffiti, songs, sculptures, hospital beds and buildings. Knowledge can be found in kindergartens and on construction sites; it is present in what we say and how we say it; embedded in what we build and how we build it; but knowledge need not exist as story. That is, knowledge exists everywhere without the need for its internal workings to be *told*, or for its logic to be thought about beyond the banal realm of fact. I accept as a natural given that electricity powers the light above me and that (given the current political climate) the power will be generated predominately from coal; I expect my phone to bring me within hearing distance of my loved ones regardless of the distance between us; and I plan to eat a good meal tonight, with clean drinking water that comes from

my kitchen tap and possibly with a glass of shiraz, and when I'm eating and drinking I will not give too much thought to the billions who do not, and cannot, share my expectations, because for longer than I have lived global disparities in wealth and opportunity have been *normal*, like electricity and telephones. Famine, war, mining, money, fickle fashions, gravity, opulence: these are *facts* of life, and for each of these facts there exists academic fields of enquiry that, at least in part, are tasked with the challenge of making these facts *strange*, to ask and re-ask why objects are pulled towards the Earth's core, for example, and if this might be otherwise?

The world becomes strange when facts are strung together to form stories, and this – I think – is journalism's great advantage and contribution as a research methodology: journalists are storytellers. We can follow the knowledge and tell its story – not simply the stories of those who have knowledge, but the stories of knowledge itself, the way it unfolds through the serendipity of a taxi ride or from an unplanned browse along a library shelf, and this process – this method of *knowledge as story* – can reveal the warp and weft of knowledge, its narrative and its context, and help academic communication approximate proper distance. Facts are dormant things embedded in knowledge and within the fabric of what is normal. Facts are banal, and without story they are lifeless. But telling the story of knowledge as an active, thinking process, searching out disparate connections between facts, observing from unseen perspectives and listening to new voices with new questions can provide insight into the field of enquiry that is being explored, building knowledge in that specific field, whilst also providing reflexive insight into the *way* a story is told, and how the telling influences society's relationship to knowledge.

The way a story is constructed and told influences *what* the story is – this is simply McLuhan restated. The logic and limitations of any medium inform *which* facts and perspectives are combined to tell the story, *how* these facts and perspectives are brought together, for *whom*, and to what *end*. Telling a story in a number of ways, across multiple media, augments the knowledge that a story seeks to communicate, and it increases the number of vantage points from which the storyteller can reflect on the narrative process, thus providing a more panoramic view of the view. This needn't mean abandoning the academy in the style of Nietzsche when he left his professorship in Basel, but it nevertheless extends an element of his philosophical mantra: "I came

to my truth in many ways, by many ways ... for *the* way does not exist” (in Rajchman 2000, p.23). Gilles Deleuze was equally fascinated by the possibility of building knowledge beyond academia’s walls. Deleuze celebrated the work of artists and writers such as John Paul Sartre whose work exceeded the probabilities of the Sorbonne and provided a “nonphilosophical understanding of philosophy” (in Rajchman 2000, p.5). Storytelling as a methodology builds on this tradition. The process of story trespasses fields and escapes their assumptions and probabilities, asking how the experiences and observations of a street musician can explain and extend ideas that emerge from journal articles and books. And story begins with vulnerability, with the understanding that knowledge is valuable precisely because so much remains unknown. Knowledge as story is not an answer, solid and planted like a telegraph pole in the ground, but a question, vulnerable and lively like an earthworm. And this is important.

You can bury a telegraph pole; you can’t bury a worm.

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### ***#City#Life* – Research as Radio Documentary**

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After four full days of mixing the audio for *#City#Life* with the guidance and expertise of a sound engineer who was also, in his way, a poet, I sat and listened to the documentary in full for the first time with the program’s commissioning producer,

Claudia Taranto. We took notes and Claudia made suggestions for changes she would like made in the fifth and final day of the mix. Sitting in the small audio booth I felt exhausted, vulnerable and anxious. Feigning a stretch, I peered across at Claudia's notepad and read, written at the bottom of the page and underlined for emphasis: This is an audacious documentary.

*#City#Life* was originally pitched to ABC Radio National as a lyrical half-hour radio essay exploring our evolving social relationships with media, and with each other, in big cities. I had already produced several of the multimedia stories for *Busking the Silence* and written many of the vignettes that appear in this thesis, and the pitch was accepted on the basis of that work – Claudia sensed a story, and she put faith in my ability to tell it. The risk, however, was that the weight of the documentary's ideas would turn the story into a theoretical brick, and this risk grew hand-in-hand with my vision for how key ideas in my thesis could translate into radio. In one sense, the documentary was audacious because the tension between the density of the ideas and their need to travel the length of a narrative arc into people's living rooms, vehicles, and – ultimately – minds, was an active ingredient in the story's character, a constant high wire act that the listener must traverse from beginning to end, and a line that we as producers had to straddle throughout the production process.

Another way of expressing this idea is that *#City#Life* is not *a story*, per se, but a series of stories about an idea, or around and through an idea. When pitching the documentary I faced the challenge of articulating what the story was (...it's about the philosophical importance of difficulty; about the need to conserve common ground in public space and about the evolving nature of public space itself – where it is and how we see and hear each other in it; it's about the idea of living *in* media rather than *with* media; about the cultural importance of busking as a public art, et cetera...); that is, the documentary is about many things, and none of them is *the story*.

Many journalism academics have made the case for journalism practice to be recognised as a valid research methodology, and it is not uncommon for radio documentaries to represent research outcomes (Bacon 2006; Lindgren et al. 2011). Another ABC Radio National documentary, *Deadly Dust*, which explores the fatal consequence of the asbestos industry in Australia, also contributed to a doctoral thesis, for example (Lindgren 2008); but, although *Deadly Dust* marries the

journalistic and academic fields, the lines of demarcation between the two are nevertheless conserved in the sense that the documentary was produced following established journalistic methodologies, and the overall aim of the doctoral thesis was to develop a theory of radio documentary production (Lindgren et al. 2011, p.76).

One reason why *#City#Life's* narrative was, and is, so hard to articulate is that its approach to storytelling proceeds more from academic methodology than it does from radio orthodoxy. This is not to say that the production did not follow the essential processes of radio production, including interviews, sound recordings, scripting and mixing – it did, of course; but the documentary's genesis is a series of closely aligned questions, rather than a clearly delineated protagonist, issue or conflict. The documentary is a condensed thesis in radio form, and these two nouns, 'radio' and 'thesis', made opposing claims on what the final outcome ought be, and on how the associated verbs ought *be done* ('to document', 'to tell', 'to explain', 'to share', et cetera).

In an important sense my methodology was a mirror image of *Deadly Dust*, the processes and lessons moving in the opposite direction. So, although I learnt a great deal about making a radio documentary, I learnt more about producing an academic thesis, and my reflections were focused predominately on the place and role of academic work in the context of a media life.

Why?

To begin with, the solitary work of thinking became collaborative. I was forced to take abstract ideas to the street in search of sonic stories from which the ideas could hang suspended, and the stories, of course, were not my own. What does it mean to live *in* media, for example, and how can this idea be told? How can it be heard in the mellifluous vernacular of those whose street-side perspective might enrich the idea's meaning for the audience, *and* for me? That is, how might new ways of *telling* 'a media life' expand the meaning of the idea?

Academia is rich in methodologies that allow for multiple perspectives, but too often the product of these methodologies is restricted to data, and the character of each story is subsequently subsumed beneath the weight of fact and hidden under the academic's own voice. Knowledge is produced, but its particulars are difficult to hear.

Angela Piccini argues that the public nature of artistic practice allows researchers to explore how the meaning of knowledge can be opened up through exposure to public scrutiny (Piccini 2002). This applies to how an artistic artefact or documentary is publicly received (ibid); and it is also true in relation to how knowledge is produced *through* practice, building on the stories of people from diverse backgrounds whose ideas respond to, reflect and extend a particular idea or body of knowledge. In *#City#Life* we hear from buskers, taxi drivers, the elderly, the homeless and a city Lord Mayor, and the insights that emerge from their stories enter into conversation with the academics from whose work the ideas emerged in the first place.

As a methodology, journalism runs the risk of turning the particulars of a story into normative theory, much like photography tends to condense the flow of time and space into a single frame; but the obverse is also true: stories are inclusive, they engender hospitality and invite the listener to participate in the process of knowledge, because story *is* process or it is nothing – without a listener, a story dies. A painter may have a deep relationship with his work, he may converse with it, argue and laugh, and this too is process – it is a conversation; but when the final brush stroke is applied and that original creative process is finished, the painting must generate new and ongoing reactions or it ceases *to be*, at least for a time. A story can be reborn under different conditions, of course, re-discovered after lying dormant like a desert flower; but the point is this: words on a page are mere material stuff until they are read, understood, and perpetuated. This is communication as culture, and it is culture as communication, knowledge as story.

A clear advantage of telling this thesis across multiple media is that the story is more likely to be heard, and the ideas and questions contained within the story are therefore more likely to grow. Telling the story as radio documentary also allowed for specific and unexpected insights into the broader project of thesis production. Just as learning a second language reveals the structure of a mother tongue, so do choices made in storytelling reveal the innate structure and expectations of other media in which the same story is told. The character of the narrative dance becomes more visible, its tempo, voice, tone and rhythm more evident. In the course of the radio production, for example, I interviewed the Canadian technology writer, Clive Thompson, whose hypothetical story of the self-driving car is referenced in Chapter One of this thesis. In

conversation, Thompson mentioned the idea of “civil inattention”, and, knowing that this term comes from the work of sociologist Erving Goffman (1971), I instinctively made reference to Goffman in my script – a reference that, after long discussion with Claudia and my co-producer Belinda Lopez, was cut – “Do we really need to know that the idea comes from Goffman?”

*...Well, of course, it's HIS idea, HIS term...*

“...Sure, but what does the fact add to the story? Does the listener need to know about Goffman, or is the reference simply a distraction from the bigger picture, another name to deal with...?”

That is, does the addition of any particular fact outweigh the loss of narrative rhythm that the burden of the fact signifies? The narrative dance of radio moves to a different tempo, of course. What is important here, however, is that the change of rhythm made me more aware that I was already moving at a particular tempo, that my dance already had a specific shape and character. When I returned to my written thesis it was with the voices of Claudia and Belinda ringing in my ears: “We can cut this bit. You’ve already said the same thing in two other ways. Why do we need to hear it again?”

*...Well, the idea might be the same, but here we're hearing a different dimension of it, and from a different perspective...*

“...No, I think it needs to be cut...”

And I did cut paragraphs, both in the radio documentary and in this thesis, and I rewrote many others, altering the expression in subtle ways, sometimes replacing a ‘however’ with a ‘but’, to give one silly example – a tiny change that any editor might make, but arguably a small transgression of academic style, nevertheless; and I should say that Claudia and Belinda were sufficiently generous to leave the final scripting decisions to me, and I was not always persuaded away from my original words. It was my dance, and that was a second important revelation that came from *#City#Life*. Creating a succinct narrative from my research forced me to reflect more deeply on my own place within the story. As soon as I began reviewing the interview material and writing the script it became clear that what binds the stories, ideas and questions

together into a coherent narrative is *me*. It was not my intention to make my having a stutter part of the story, for example, but I quickly realised that I must. Why was I telling the story? What is my own, personal insight into the difficulties of communication and understanding? How did I feel producing a feature for radio? What was my view of the view?

My experience as somebody who stutters is a vital part of this thesis – even if I have not mentioned it until now – and I would not have seen this so clearly had I not told the thesis across multiple media, as a journalist and as an academic. Like habitus and story, journalism is a process, a question of relationships, and it is also a thing, an imperfect agora for debate where voices meet *through* the journalist. That is, as a story is produced the journalist becomes the medium through which different voices are connected. This became most clear to me when I sat late one evening to interview Mark Deuze, each of us in a radio studio on opposite sides of the planet, two academics taking part in the process of journalistic storytelling, and coming together because of the framework, infrastructure and outcomes that journalism provides. The interview took place because I was producing a radio documentary that related to Deuze's work – not because I was producing a thesis, it must be emphasised, but a documentary.<sup>47</sup>

I was a conduit, a medium through which the stories of people on the street – people with whom I identify and share a culture – were connected with the ideas and framework of an academic with whom I also identify and share a culture; and I was crafting a story about ideas and the way they play out, working as a journalist, interviewing and recording, with a colleague in the room who was tasked with throwing paper at me should my language flirt too much with academic jargon. I was working with ideas, but my primary concern was for the story, for how facts and theory could be shared, challenged, applied and perpetuated through tales, anecdotes, songs, jokes and testimonies. It was not possible to tell the whole story – it never is – but *a story* was possible nevertheless – a critical story, playful and imperfect, and told

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<sup>47</sup> This is not, of course, to say that journalism provides the only platform for conversation between academics. International conferences serve this purpose, and Deuze himself has interviewed academics such as Zygmunt Bauman for journal articles (Deuze 2007). It is possible, furthermore, that Mark Deuze may have found time to talk with me about my work via Skype; but having never met, and without the additional motivation and framework that a journalistic outcome provides, that possibility is less likely.

with an eye to proper distance. The story is on the radio, on the Net, and it is *here*, written on the pages of this thesis.

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***Busking the Silence: Art, Journalism and Digital Space***

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In Australia, journalism has nothing to do with art, unless it is about art. The Australia Council for the Arts will not fund anything that identifies itself as journalism, for example.<sup>48</sup> We continue working with a divide that makes innovations in aesthetic journalism problematic. Journalists can be creative, but we do not produce art – ours is a media space, not an art space.

In *Aesthetic Journalism*, Alfredo Cramerotti cites the work of many established artists who produce it following a journalistic methodology, but he also identifies several challenges for aesthetic journalism, and it is clear from his discussion of these challenges that the smudgy borderline between the artistic and journalistic fields is contested beyond Australian shores. Cramerotti warns that aesthetic journalism risks becoming devoid of influence if it is unable to erode the barriers between art spaces and media spaces, thus enlarging its audience, and in so doing challenging policy with practice.

Space is a core subject and ongoing question in this thesis: space as media; space as geography; space as distance and proximity; and the question of how the Internet can be conceived of as an art space is explored in and through *Busking the Silence*. The Net is a frontier where journalism is yet to realise that it cannot also be art, and where new modes of expression are therefore emerging. Like a city, the Internet is a product of our imagination, a landscape made of our desires, needs and fears, its geography and grammar contested and in flux. This frontier space provides new audiences and new public places where art is open to scrutiny and where old borders can be transgressed, but there remains a parallel challenge, because new modes of expression are needed to render strange the new ontologies of a media life (Cramerotti 2009, p.40).

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<sup>48</sup> See: <http://www.australiacouncil.gov.au/grants>

My design and concept for *Busking the Silence* draws on the traditions of video art and installation art to communicate the charm and oddity of an everyday space: the Devonshire St tunnel beneath Sydney's Central Railway Station. The layout of the documentary is interactive, but it is also contained, and simple. Indeed, I am not interested in interactivity as a technical variable, but as a social variable. *Busking the Silence* is concerned with how we relate to each other in and through the hybrid spaces of a media life, both in the tunnel as an absolute space, and as a relational space on the screen of an iPad or smart phone. And relationships are not technical things, but social processes; they are facilitated by technology, but grounded in our ability to listen and to understand. In form and in substance *Busking the Silence* is therefore about the possibility of proper distance, and about how this idea can be communicated through the substance and form of multimedia storytelling. Of course, I can't say this to commissioning producers or gallery curators any more than I can pitch *#City#Life* as a documentary about 'a media life'; and so the project must also be about other things – the cultural importance of street art as something that interrupts the monotony of everyday life, for example; or the adage that everybody has a story to tell.

And I have shown and explained the project in many ways, to many people. The initial response has consistently been enthusiastic; then the realities set in, the difficulties of placing a documentary that doesn't fit neatly into any established box. I showed an early version of the project to Arul Baskaran, the then director of Innovation at the Australian Broadcasting Corporation, for example. His response was enthusiastic, but ABC Innovation does not commission work, Arul told me, and, given that the project is screen-based, he suggested that I speak with a commissioning producer from a television department. "Have you spoken with ABC Arts?" he asked (pers. Comm. November 2012).

This was helpful advice, and an obvious next step. The content I was producing for *Busking the Silence* lent itself perfectly to an interactive art installation in an urban space, perhaps a laneway or tunnel, and I hoped to produce the documentary-come-installation artwork across digital and smelly spaces to more clearly express and develop some of the key ideas in this thesis. The response I received from the head of ABC Arts, Katrina Sedgwick, and from ABC Arts' Online producer, Nicola Harvey,

was overwhelmingly supportive. My vision for a documentary that was also an art installation fitted perfectly with their strategic planning, and together we put together a project plan that included an interactive public art installation in Sydney's *Art and About* festival, a 'digital installation' on the new homepage of ABC Arts, and a documentary with ABC Radio National, which I was also pitching at that time.<sup>49</sup> The support of ABC Arts was conditional, however, and relied on the project's acceptance into *Art and About* – a condition that shouldn't be a problem, I was told, as Katrina had a good working relationship with the City of Sydney council and the application had a good chance. I was confident and excited, and so was ABC Arts (pers. Comm. December 2012).

But *Busking the Silence* wasn't shortlisted for *Art and About*, and I was unable to find out why – the selection committee would not provide a rationale. Clearly, however, my association with the ABC had not been the golden ticket I had hoped it to be, and in later discussions with Holly Williams, the then director of the UTS<sup>50</sup> Gallery, and with Deborah Turnbull, digital media curator at Sydney's Powerhouse Museum – both of whom I approached with the idea of an installation – it was suggested that the association with the ABC blurred the borders between art and journalism, making the project too risky for a public arts festival. Indeed, this was also the UTS Gallery's response to a proposed exhibition: *Busking the Silence* contains photos and stories of real people, and, irrespective of the project's conceptual value, some of the gallery's patrons may object to an exhibition that could be interpreted as journalism, especially given that the same content was also being produced *as* journalism (pers. Comm. May 2013).

That is an abbreviated story of my attempts to produce *Busking the Silence* across digital and smelly space. Clearly it's important not to conflate a single story with normative theory – another journalist with a different professional network, or simply a different demeanour might have had a more fruitful experience; but the lessons and observations that emerge are significant nevertheless, and only I can share them. I have taken the journey to tell the story. In my experience, then, aesthetic journalism remains an illusive terrain for journalists. Media corporations are ill equipped to

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<sup>49</sup> The complete Expression of Interest (EOI) for Art and About is included here as Appendix Three, together with the supporting documentation from ABC Arts and ABC Radio National.

<sup>50</sup> University of Technology, Sydney

support or publish innovative freelance projects, and the artistic field remains tightly guarded. The ABC, for example, remains split into Television, Online and Radio divisions. The online team is focused on publishing breaking news and re-crafting ABC television and radio content for the Net, and the other divisions do not typically commission work that goes beyond their normal scope of practice. The ABC has recently created a multiplatform team tasked with producing projects between the divisions, but it has a policy of only publishing journalism that is produced in-house, and this would have been an additional obstacle for a producer such as Nicola Harvey from ABC Arts had she attempted to commission *Busking the Silence* (pers. Comm. February 2013). Self-publication therefore becomes the easiest and most practical solution, but in most cases this is a short-term solution because professional journalists need institutional and financial support from allied organisations and media corporations. Funding that is crowd sourced may provide one solution to this dilemma, at least in cases where the journalist is able to draw upon a strong, established social network, and this is a possibility that requires further research; but not here, and not now...

As I write it is late August, I plan to submit this thesis within a month, and still I'm unsure how and where *Busking the Silence* will be published. Australia's Special Broadcasting Service (SBS) has stated its desire to license the project, however the commissioning producer, John-Paul Marin, is unable to confirm SBS's commitment until after a budget meeting in mid-September. The version of the project that I am submitting with this thesis is therefore a working template that illustrates what *Busking the Silence* will look like on an iPad, even though the template itself is built in Flash, an old program that is relatively easy to use for designing and programming interactive content, but a program that is incompatible with mobile devices.

If SBS does not license the project I will publish *Busking the Silence* independently. Either way, the results will provide material for further research, as will my ongoing attempts to create a public art installation from the documentary. In this thesis, however, my concern and intention has been to provide a theoretical and philosophical grounding for aesthetic journalism across the hybrid spaces of a media life, rather than 'test' the reception of my creative work in its various forms; and, from the production process, several additional lessons can be drawn.

*Busking the Silence* attempts to respond directly to Neil Postman's assertion that photography can show a beach, but never say 'the ocean' as a generalised, abstract idea (Postman 1987, p.73). Indeed, *Busking the Silence* was designed as a way of *telling* the key ideas of this thesis in audiovisual form, and in doing so to test the expressive limitations of audiovisual journalism. David Isay argues that multimedia journalism has more "dimensions" than text-based reportage (in Maguire 2011). This is true in terms of the complexity of multimedia production, but his argument is less straightforward in relation to expression, especially the expression of an abstract idea like proper distance, or the sensation of loneliness in crowded places. Writing is agile in space and time. Words can transport ideas and questions between countries and periods, from present to past to future, in ways that visual expression cannot. Writing can also be self-referential and reflexive, and – perhaps most importantly – the grammar of written expression makes it easy to ask questions that are clearly identifiable *as* questions – no other form of expression enjoys the exact equivalent of the question mark. Writing, then, is also multi-dimensional, and the written vignettes that are included throughout this thesis have been my way of articulating parts of the story – the story of this multimedia thesis – that for different reasons were impossible to record in pixels or as audio. But an audiovisual approach has clear advantages, too. Telling abstract ideas through image and sound makes the narrative dance more apparent, precisely because abstraction is harder to achieve. It was while producing *Busking the Silence* that I began to conceive of story structure in relation to axes, to sense the movement of one 'dimension' of the audiovisual medium across the axis of another dimension, and to think about how this lateral movement serves to amplify and ground a story, to think about the ways that sound provides context, colour and evocation for photography, for example, and about how photography does the same for audio.

Sound can make photography strange, revealing the oddity of a mute medium, and because sound expands photography beyond the visual axis it is also an invitation to experiment with form, to play with tone, mood and rhythm, much like a writer adjusts her sentence length and structure to express an idea through form as well as content.

Alexander Sovronsky and Richard Neho are both buskers, but the two men are contrary in character: Alexander is pensive and composed; Rich is typically in three

places at once. When producing their respective stories I attempted to give a sense of this contrast in character. Alexander's story is minimalist in form, pairing voice and violin to create the same sense of calm that I felt in his presence; Rich's story is a jumbled eruption of ideas, anecdotes and emotions, his immense talent and enormous ego paradoxically constrained by the tunnel in which he is king. Despite the volume and speed of Rich's narrative, both stories are also an essay in digital 'quiet spaces', an attempt to employ photography and audio to re-cognise the world as strange, large, mysterious and wonderful, and this is also true of *Busking the Silence* in its entirety.<sup>51</sup>

And, of course, *Busking the Silence* is (primarily) a digital documentary – if it does one day appear as an installation in the smelly sphere it will only be to emphasise that the Net, too, is a public space, and to make clearer the dialectic between absolute and relational spaces that is already at the heart of the project. And digital documentaries remain scarce – especially those that seek to break new ground – partly because the time and costs associated with such projects are prohibitive (Maguire 2011). 'Snowfall' – for example – the Pulitzer-winning digital feature by *The New York Times* took a team of 17 staff members six-months to produce, and reportedly cost close to a million dollars (Thompson 2012). The concept, design and content of *Busking the Silence* was produced by one person; but despite its smaller scale, I would not likely have completed the project if it weren't also a thesis due to the institutional obstacles facing aesthetic journalism. If storytelling is a journalistic gift to academia, the academy pays its debts with innovation in journalism that is not commercially motivated, with a story that expands the possibilities of digital expression and – I hope – with a story that enhances the way we think about life together in media. *Busking the Silence* is an attempt at journalism that is also art, and of art that is also journalism, to communicate, test and embody a set of ideas and questions that are also a thesis.

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<sup>51</sup> By 're-cognise' I mean to 're-think', returning here to the Latin root of *recognition*. It is through a critical re-thinking of surface assumptions that is possible to properly see, or recognise, the world.

## Appendix One

The video footage recorded in Devonshire St Tunnel for *Busking the Silence* provides approximately 50 minutes of randomised and discrete observation of personal media use in Sydney. The videos were produced between February 2011 and March 2014. They were not shot with the intention of recording data, and it must be acknowledged that in many instances it is difficult to determine if a person is listening to music on headphones, or if they are otherwise engaged with personal media. In some cases people move too quickly across the screen to be properly observed, or are too close to the camera. In cases where it is not clear if a person is engaged with personal media it is assumed that they are not. Young children were not included in the tally, but unaccompanied school-age children were included. The videos were watched in real-time, and only once. The final count must therefore be read as an approximation, and the following information should simply be taken as an indication of personal media use at a particular place and time.

- Of the approximately 1837 people who pass the camera, approximately 487 of them are engaged with personal media. That is, they are looking at a telephone, speaking on a telephone, listening to music on headphones, or reading a newspaper, magazine or book.
- That represents 26.5 per cent of the tally, or just over one quarter of the population that is engaged with multiple media at the one time, giving a clear (albeit approximate) indication of the hybrid nature of our smelly/digital media life.

## Appendix Two: Interview with Mark Deuze, 22 April 2014 (transcript)

**BB** An important idea in your work is that we no longer live *with* media, but *in* media. Can you expand on this?

**MD** Sure. First and foremost it's kind of a rhetorical play, in the sense that if we think that we live with media we inevitably assume that media are things outside of us that we can control, and effectively can switch off. It also enables us to think of media as machines that influence us, and that therefore we can then project all kinds of anxieties onto them, like, 'Oh, our kids are becoming too violent or too over-sexualised because of what's on TV or in video games.' Or, 'Oh, we're spending too much time communicating via smart phones and not face-to-face anymore', and those sorts of arguments.

And those sorts of arguments are in my mind very stale, very useless, actually, to truly take responsibility for what we're doing, and so to say that we live *in* media is first and foremost an acknowledgement that really almost nothing in your life takes place outside of media in the sense that media at some point had something to do with it and therefore plays a shaping part in how you make sense of yourself and your world in which you live. And so that's definitely the sort of starting point for my work and for the book and that leads to all sorts of considerations beyond the traditional media effects idea.

**BB** Can you think of any examples from your own life? How do you experience a media life?

**MD** Well, in my own life I experience living in media in a number of ways. In terms of work, I mean, I had the privilege to work in a couple of different countries. Without email, that would never happen. I mean, the way that contacts internationally can be facilitated quickly, things organised, and all of a sudden you pack your bags and you're on your way. I'm not saying that migration doesn't occur without media, I'm just saying that there's an acceleration process involved and a sort of ease of getting this sort of communication going. Also, because I have moved internationally I inevitably end up with personal relationships – both romantic and friendly – that cross borders. Now, how you maintain those is often the case of incessant texting, tweeting, facebooking and what-not, and it's like those relationships are to some

extent enhanced but also changed because of the way they work out in media, and these are two very simple examples of how on the most fundamental experiences of life, media play a fundamental role.

Maybe a third example that could work here as well is that a couple of years ago my dad passed away. Shortly before, he made a Facebook profile so that he could look at my pictures – I was living in the United States, he was living in the Netherlands – he wanted to see snapshots of my life. After his passing, Facebook sent me these reminders: ‘Hey, you haven’t connected with Jan for a while, why don’t you say hi?’ And of course my dad’s picture, and that was on the one hand disconcerting and on the other hand kind of nice in a strange way. So in those simple ways you can see how media, on a very fundamental, quite emotional and intimate level, are part of the makeup of everyday life.

**BB** So, for a long time what we have known of Others has come to us through the media – what we know of and about other people, we know through the media; but it sounds like what you’re suggesting has a lot to do with the way that we present ourselves, as well as the way that we see other people. Could you speak to that?

**MD** Yeah, the thing with media life is that there’s two ways of thinking about living in media. One would be to look at the ‘the media’ and their role in everything – what we see on television, what we hear on the radio, the way we use media technologies and the industry behind it – and we would look at the way that the interface of Facebook structures interpersonal communication, and is it a good thing that on Facebook we can only ‘like’ something, or is that a sort of sanitised way of communicating to each other, that erases any sort of edge or conflict that we might have with each other, which is an equally viable part of communication. That’s one way of looking at things.

Another way would say living with media comes with an interesting type of social pressure, and that pressure comes with... well, we’re all naturally inclined to present ourselves to the world, to, if you will, perform a certain role – the good student, the nice mother, the hard worker, the fun friend – we all have all kinds of roles that we play in different settings and that doesn’t make us any less real or inauthentic, it’s just how we are part of the social environment.

Now, generally those roles can be relatively easily controlled by us under normal circumstances because we know who our audience is: our friends in the pub, our colleagues at work, other students at school; however in media, that public is invisible, and it could be anyone. And, what is interesting to see is how a lot of us respond to that additional pressure is to spend all, if not most of our time mildly obsessively editing ourselves and almost unconsciously thinking of this invisible audience that may be watching. And on top of that, almost everybody in our life, especially all forms of authority in our life – our parents, our professors, our politicians – warn us every chance they get, ‘Oh, be careful what you do in media, be careful what you post online, things will come back to bite you.’

And then on top of that the news media report on a spying scandal and Edward Snowden and mass surveillance and big brother and it’s quite daunting to find your own way in this space without just constantly obsessively editing yourself in order to circumvent or bypass all these pressures of surveillance, observing and monitoring that is going on all around you, and I think that’s the real challenge here, not the fact not that we maybe spend too much time on social media – you know, ‘*What about facebook?*’ – but more how do we stop censoring ourselves and trying to look good all the time and use our life in media to more fun and responsible ends.

**BB** You also speak of the media disappearing from our lives. Can you explain that?

**MD** There is a kind of paradox here. On the one hand we live in media and clearly most of us are quite aware that this is happening, in the sense that there is almost no conversation that you have in the pub, socially with friends, or at home, that doesn’t involve media. I mean people put their phones on the table – ‘*Oh, put the damn thing away*’, or ‘*We spend too much time with these devices*’ – I mean, people are very much aware of media.

The funny thing that I would argue though is that this actually is a symptom of media disappearing into our lives. It means that we all have this sort of heightened awareness that media are everywhere and on our bodies, like we wear these media – most of our media are personal, portable media, laptops, tablets, smart phones – and at the same time these media disappear in the sense that you pick up a smart phone today, how can you tell it’s a phone? I mean it has disguised itself as this sexy, warm,

rounded-off, black thing that lives very close to you, our televisions become so big and so bright and so detailed that we get absorbed by them.

I mean, we cannot comprehend the full picture of a high definition television anymore. Those would be two examples of technologies that are universal on the planet that in their own unique way disappear from us, they become much harder to grasp, to see, to recognise as distinct technologies that we have some kind of useful relationship with; instead we get enveloped by them.

It's interesting to see the next generation of televisions that are coming to our homes in the next couple of years aren't straight anymore, but they're round, like in a way literally wrapping themselves around us, and – if you're a bit more darkly inclined – swallowing us whole. And so to me, even in the design of technology you see there are attempts to disguise themselves, to make themselves invisible and say to us, '*Just live your life, do what you otherwise would do. We'll just be here in the background.*'

And exactly because of that we talk about media much more but in a way we don't really know what we're talking about anymore.

**BB** The cover of your book, Mark, has fish on it. Are they there for a reason?

**MD** When I first started to work on the research of the book *Media Life*, I pitched the idea to my publisher, and the idea was simply to explore what would happen if we think about media as something that we live in rather than live with. That was pretty much the idea in its entirety. And of course I had some topics, I wanted to talk about how that plays out in our love life, how do we deal with issues of community, and several other topics, but the bottom line was how do we live in media rather than live with media.

What was interesting was that two weeks later the publisher sent me back a book cover. They had sent my idea to a graphic artist and apparently he got inspired and he sent back this book cover of fish swimming in water and that gave me the idea of, 'Yeah, media are like what water is to fish'. It's absolutely an intrinsic part of your lived experience, you could say it's necessary for survival if we want to survive in this world, today, we cannot survive without media, we cannot not be media literate, if you will.

But at the same time media are invisible to us. I think it was Einstein who said, “Whoever invented water, it certainly wasn’t a fish.” So throughout working on the book I kept this image in front of me reminding me that this was the... because it’s sometimes really hard to get to the mind set that, ‘Yes I’m living in this media, this device is not something outside of me, it’s just as much me as I am it’, and it sounds a bit weird perhaps, but it was really useful to think of us as, of our relationship to media, as like water is to fish.

**BB** I’d like to quickly tell you about a conversation I had last week with a taxi driver because I’d be interested to know your impressions of it and how you read it. The taxi driver commented that five or six years ago he could approach a crowded bus stop and read through people’s body language whether they were in a rush or not, particularly women, he said, were very good at indicating if they were in a rush and hence needing a taxi. But he says that now when he drives past a bus stop everyone is essentially in the same posture, they’re all looking at their phones, probably looking at a mobile .app to see where the bus is, and it’s impossible for him to tell if anybody is in a rush and needs a taxi because, in his own words, “there is less direct communication”. How do you read that and how does it relate to a media life, if at all?

**MD** The way we act in public spaces, or perhaps a better way of putting it would be the way we move through public space isn’t necessarily different from before, perhaps you could say that public spaces have become much more crowded than they used to be, cities have become larger and fuller and more condensed. But the role of media in that environment is crucial. Now, just consider for a moment the nature of a contemporary public space, like a big city, downtown area like Sydney, Melbourne or here in Amsterdam, these are very crowded spaces. In fact these are very scary spaces. I mean it’s stressful to navigate through a big city, you have to encounter strangers and strangeness, you have to navigate traffic, you’re on your way to something which might be, you know, a date, which is exciting, or a really boring meeting, there’s lots of information to negotiate both within you and in the environment around you, and what we see from a media life point of view is that having headphones on, talking on your phone while you’re waiting for a bus or just walking from A to B, is a way to reclaim that public space for yourself, so that public

space becomes your private space, just for a moment, and what you do in that private space is actually not hide, or retreat, but what most people do with their media in public space is connect to other people, or to sources of information that are useful: checking whether the bus is on time, calling a cab, or what's in the theatre tonight.

And so, I mean from a living *with* media perspective the way people use cell phones and laptops in public space could be a source of concern, like, 'Are we still authentically interacting with each other? Are we still seeing the world as it really is?' And from a media life perspective you would look at this as how public and private are sort of folded onto each other, how people use these media to reclaim privacy in a public space that is otherwise a quite –well – at the very least complex to navigate.

**BB** We're talking about the Internet then as a public space. Is the Internet a public space?

**MD** For me the best way to look at the Internet is not make a distinction between whether it is a private or public space but it is both things at the same time. It is public in part because everything you do online gets recorded and stored and logged somewhere, by an Internet service provider, by a website, by a computer; it's public in the sense that a lot of our actions online are in the realm of social media and online social networks, so those actions are public; and it's private because most of what we do online has to do with something that we personally care about, something that we need, contacts that we make, and messages that we send, so public and private as distinct spaces or terms in a way don't mean anything online, in the fact that they are both there at the same time.

**BB** To invert that last question somewhat, can cities be thought of as media?

**MD** Absolutely. German philosopher Friedrich Kittler actually made that point in the 1980s that the city is a media, and what he meant was that considering the nature of life in today's cities nobody who lives in a city or visits a city really sees the city anymore, it's impossible. I mean, you could live your entire life in Sydney and still not see the entire city. And most people who navigate cities do so in a very ritualistic way, they go from A to B in some kind of preferred way, riding a bike, taking the bus or car, or whatnot, and also taking the same route, stopping at the same grocery store and so forth. Maybe we move around two, three times, but that's pretty much it.

And the only thing we know about the city is what the city tells us about itself. Now, how does it do that? For example, by traffic lights: green you can cross the street; red you have to stop. It's the city communicating with you what it is and what the rules are – maps that used to be on posters, and now they're on your phone that you use to navigate space. And so, quite literally, the only way to really see the city as a city would be if you hover over it in a helicopter, which most of us never do. So the city is really a combination of information producing systems that tell you what the city is, that tell you where to go, and what the rules of interaction are. So in that sense a city is most definitely media.

**BB** I'm interested to follow up on that idea of the borders between public and private space not being as important, or not being important in a media life, because – and this again would be a question from a living *with* media perspective – but politically the difference between private and public space, and what we would think of as the public sphere and how we create a public conversation with common focal points, is changing in a social landscape in cities, in media, both online and offline. I say this because I'd like to share with you another brief anecdote, from a street musician, who said to me that he enjoyed his work because it was a chance for him to practise his music but it was also a chance for him to interrupt people, and he saw that process of interrupting as important. The way he phrased it was that he was interrupting people's alienation, and he saw a social value in that, and I'm wondering if you have any concerns from the media life perspective about the tone or character of our public conversation?

**MD** From my media life perspective I have a hard time being judgemental or normative about the relative quality of interaction when you speak face-to-face or when you listen to a musician playing live, or whether it's a musician playing on the street, a busker, vis-à-vis talking with somebody on the phone or listening to your favourite tune on your headphones while you're making your way from point A to B in the city. Simply denouncing the latter activities as alienated or less connected to the 'real' or the 'real world' I find profoundly problematic. I mean, if I just spend the night at my girlfriend's and in the morning I'm walking across the street and I'm giving her a call – like 'Oh, I really enjoyed our breakfast together' – I mean that is

much more meaningful, and real, even, than having a chat with a stranger on the street. If I listen to music on my headphones, which is music that really calms me down and relaxes me, it's beautiful music because I'm on my way to a job interview that I'm a bit stressed up about, why is that any less meaningful, or significant or relevant, or has any kind of different quality than if I would not wear these technologies, if I would be more engaged with the noise of the street?

I'm not saying it's better that we use media in public space and therefore our public space becomes suffused with people with headphones on and always looking at the screens of their personal devices, I'm just saying that when a musician on the street considers part of his or her function to interrupt and make them realise their surroundings again, that's a beautiful, beautiful idea but it doesn't make what they were doing before necessarily a form of alienation or being disconnected from the real world.

That's not to say that this doesn't happen. I do think that living in media comes with a unique type of social responsibility that we have, and for me that responsibility is not so much about whether or not we use too much media, I think that is a rather meaningless statement, because, what is too much media? It's a rather useless discussion. That responsibility comes more with, well, obviously in that media, in the media, our lives to some extent seem to come more under our control. The complexity of public space becomes more manageable if we walk through it with our own personal soundtrack guiding us. Now, that's wonderful; the danger is that we use that control to really block out anything that we don't want or don't expect anymore. In other words that we block out bumping up to strangers or strangeness is a fundamental function of our lives as social animals. I mean that takes responsibility, that takes deliberate use of media, a willingness to really take responsibility for what you're seeing, also, in your media.

Maybe I can give a quick example. The last couple of years the whole world has witnessed and participated in what the media often call the Arab Spring, uprisings and protest demonstrations all across the Arab world. And those protests and demonstrations are largely influenced and to some extent even enabled by the participation in them from people not actually in the Arab world, re-Tweeting, forwarding, setting up Facebook pages, opening up YouTube channels and so on and

so forth. Now, this is interesting, because if we would see a report on a demonstration in Tunisia on ABC news and yeah, OK, it's a report of like two and a half minutes and then the next thing, something that Rupert Murdoch says is in the news and then the weather and that's it, and that's the extend of our witnessing – so we're just consuming that information; however, if we see it on our Facebook newsfeed it's forwarded from our friends, it's re-Tweeted by people who we know and trust, we participate in it, all of a sudden we become part of the events that impact on people like us on the other side of the world. We're not consuming anymore, we're not consuming news about their lives, we're actually witnesses, we participate.

Now, witnessing comes with responsibility. What are you going to do with that kind of information, with that kind of knowledge, with that kind of participation? So, instead of seeing that as sort of alienating, or that it's less real that we interact so much through media, or in media, rather than perhaps on the streets in the real world, I think actually there is a moment here to take even more responsibility, to be more in the world precisely because we are in media. That's how I would see that particular issue.

**BB** But if we do then remove the word 'alienation', or any other qualifying word from this idea that the busker was expressing, I wonder if as an artist in a public space, and given that art has had the role in society of making media visible to us, of making us aware of the media that we have, through aesthetics, I suspect that perhaps a busker is an ally of yours in the sense that they are not necessarily trying to interrupt because one media is better than the other, but simply because to interrupt is to make us aware of the fact that the media that we might have in our hand is already interrupting the medium of the bus, or the street. Can you speak to that idea?

**MD** Well, I think music in general, music on our headphones, or music performed by a musician on the streets and music performed live in a concert is of course also media, and with the additional perk, if you will, that it tends to draw us in and make us lose ourselves in media. I mean, I think this was first, or at least most powerfully expressed over a hundred years ago by Friedrich Nietzsche, who celebrated this idea that in music you can revel and lose yourself and get in touch with a kind of life that more often than not we are out of touch with in the busyness of everyday life and work. And so I would argue that walking on the street with your headphones blasting

a cool beat, making you appreciate your walk, or passing a busker on the street and being drawn in by his or her beautiful playing are in a way exactly the same experience, and the funny thing is that we are confronted with a medium that draws us in and makes us in that process forget that it's a medium. And bring us in touch with a certain set of emotions: aesthetic appreciation, or just fun, or sadness, we know that certain music makes us cry or makes us happy or makes us sad. And I think that this for me touches on a really important point: that the way to make sense of our lives in media, the way to make sense of the way that we relate to each other in media and the way that we relate to each other in media and the way that we relate to the world in media, is actually the study of affect, or to put it more simply the study of what Rene Descartes, I think in 1649, he called it "the passions of the soul". What are the passions of the soul? That's love, that's passion, that's anger, that's sadness, that's guilt, that's shame – all of these big emotions – that's what we experience in media!

And the funny thing is that in my field, in media studies, in communications studies, we often don't talk about those things at all, only as an afterthought, as things that get affected by media: '*Because of media we become more angry, or more sad or more isolated*', or something like that. But I think it's exactly the other way around, it's that we need to be in touch with these emotions in order to feel and be alive and right now those emotions get most powerfully carried out in media, or at least as powerfully in media as in face-to-face or other types of encounters. And I think that can also be the beauty of media. That we look at them not as cold machines or influencing technologies, but as American scholar Danah Boyd calls them, 'places of passion', and I think that's a beautiful way of thinking about media in our lives.

**BB** You speak about music in your work in another context, that of the silent disco, can you explain what these are and why they're important?

**MD** Yeah, in my work I use a silent disco as a metaphor for the way we are in the world. Now a silent disco is a concept originally developed by the summer festivals that we now see in all our cities: every public park in the summer has some kind of festival with artists and musicians and what-not, and often they would like to party all night long, I mean, who wouldn't? In the summer and in a park, that's certainly a great idea; however most city governments and city ordinances don't allow for a lot of noise after a certain hour, let's say after 11pm or midnight. So as a way to counter

that effect and still be able to party on, several people both in the Netherlands and in the UK, I think, originally came up with the idea of giving everybody in the park a set of headphones and then just basically streaming music directly to their headphones, via an FM frequency, just like radio, if you will.

And then of course a more entrepreneurial DJ came up with the idea that, well, if you can do that you can actually stream different types of music to different types of headphones, so what you now have is silent discos where let's say two, three, five hundred people or even a thousand people are dancing together, let's say in a tent, listening to two or three different types of music. Everybody is clearly having fun – if you have a look at videos of Silent Discos on YouTube or if you've ever attended one, it's definitely a lot of fun – but everyone is also distinctly on their own, sort of caught within their own personal bubble of music that they appreciate by pushing a button on their headset.

For me, that's a really nice working metaphor for the way we are in the world and media, is that we're obviously connected to everybody else, both literally through our devices and through our technologies and through the issues that bind us, whether the issue is global warming or the financial crisis or mass surveillance, these are all issues that affect us all. So, we are obviously connected, where at the same time we increasingly feel quite alone in this space. That can be a daunting feeling, like a powerlessness to do anything with all these connections and the complexity thereof, and on the other hand, well, for a lot of us we have the tools at our disposal to make our own way in the world. I'm not saying that is easy, but it's certainly possible.

So the point is, we're neither alone nor together, we're both at the same time, and these are two very different types of emotions or ways of being but it's important for me to not consider them in isolation, or to ask the question, 'Are we becoming more alone, or more together?' But always be mindful and appreciative of, well, both at the same time, all the time, and I use the silent disco also as a metaphor to suggest that it's not necessarily without fun.

**BB** Mark, what have you observed of sub-populations in the Netherlands or elsewhere who obviously don't live *outside* of media but whose experience of media renders them in some way social outsiders – I'm thinking of the elderly, or the homeless, for

example – who may not have access to media. I think of my 91 year-old grandmother who lives alone at home, and her life in media, which is a different one, in most ways, to mine. What have you observed of these sub-populations?

**MD** There are two ways for thinking about living in media for those who do not have access to media, or do not have the skills necessarily to use media in ways that are empowering. The one is to strictly think of media as a set of technologies that require electricity, for one, and some kind of literacy to use them and in that sense indeed there are all kinds of groups in society who are to some extent disenfranchised and do not enjoy the same kind of access that others have, and I do want to point out that in order for us to see those people we need media, because most of us do not actually have access or take the effort to see those people, the people who are not *in* media. There are parts of the world that do not have electricity and the way for us to take responsibility and to see who they are, to recognise how they live, we need other people to tell their stories in media, that's how we become involved, and that's how we can witness.

That's one way of looking at it. The other way is to not just think of media as technologies but also as relationships in the sense that media are... Maybe I can give an example: when I explain my work to friends they often say, 'Yeah, but what if tomorrow I go to some kind of hut in the middle of a forest and I leave all my technologies at home and the hut doesn't have access to cell phones or cell phone towers or Internet or what-not, and then I don't live in media, right? So your argument is silly, it's only for big cities.'

And I say, 'Well, yes, if you only think about media as your devices and the internet and cell phones, but what if you think about the fact that almost all your relationships, your friendships, what you know of other people and other places in the world, and all of these things that also make you who you are, well, those are media too, or to some extent are mediated, too – you can't switch that off, you can't switch off what has made you, so you take your media with you, regardless of where you are.' So in that sense, and I know I'm broadening the definition of media quite significantly, but I think it's helpful to think about media that way, too. It's not just our technologies; it's also what we do in and through these technologies and how they play a part in making us who we are. And of course what we primarily do in media is establish, maintain,

sometimes break-off relationships, and those relationships are always part of us, and for me it's helpful to think about media in those terms when the question comes up, 'Hey, but what about people who can't use technology or don't have electricity?' I say, 'Well then I have a responsibility to be mindful of the relationship that I have with them, too, even though they are not online, but the story about them is.'

**BB** This is one of the many places where I think this framework of the media life is such a fascinating thing to work with because there are some productive paradoxes in the sense that the elderly, the homeless, as you say, are mostly present to us as mediated people, we know of them through the media, and yet there is an obligation then to think about the social quality of that mediation itself, because if they are mostly present to us through the media then the media itself takes on a moral dimension. To what extent, if at all, are you concerned with this moral dimension?

**MD** I think the primary concern with living in media is that it tempts us to only think of ourselves, about our relationships, our acting in the world, our performance, simply the way we look; I mean that's how media address us. Our media devices talk to us like we're the only person in the world, right? We have this smart phone in our hands and it vibrates and it's warm and we can now even talk to it and it does things for us. The word of the year in 2013 worldwide was the 'selfie', taking a picture of yourself and posting and sharing it on social media. The seduction of media life is to use this connection to the world back onto yourself, and this is not because media are evil, or because this is what media do; we are to some extent biologically wired to respond to the idea, or to the perception that we're being watched, and that makes us behave according to what we perceive the rules to be in our environment. In media, that perception is amplified to an enormous extent, so that like I said earlier we are mildly obsessively trying to control ourselves in media, and I think that's a concern.

By focusing on ourselves in media we forget that what media primarily do is make relationships and relations to others and other things and other ideas and other places and other people visible, and real, and remove them from the realm of consuming them, like you would consume a story on television or a song on the radio, and they become things that we witness. So for me, very much the idea of media life, a way to move morally or ethically in media, is not to not make it about yourself so much anymore and to consider media as actually a way of taking responsibility for being in

the world, for attending that silent disco, for dancing with others. And that can be fun, and it should be, but it also should have an ethical dimension, a way of taking responsibility so that you are in the world, that the world is at your fingertips, well, that means you should do something with that. And it's regrettable that what you do with that is primarily about you. Some of it is fine, of course, that's it's about you, but let's not make it all of it.

**BB** Mark, I think that to some extent you have just answered this next question, but how would you like to see these ideas of yours applied in society?

**MD** Well, I think for me two key takeaways of the media life perspective are: on the one hand, I'm basically saying to people who worry about media, 'Relax! Just chill for a moment. Media aren't evil, they aren't our saviours, they are an intrinsic part of life; they're part of our struggle for survival in this world. And, if anything they amplify, accelerate and make visible what was already there. And enjoy! And forgive each other and yourself for the little transgressions that we make in media and the sometimes obsessive nature with which we engage with each other or especially ourselves in media, just forgive each other a little bit. We're just living our lives and like we are quite complicated and messy people without media we're certainly also in media, and we should be, and I think that's the thing. And I think that leads me to the second way of applying the media life, or the second takeaway of the media life point of view: living in media does not need to be about ourselves, it can actually be a wonderful way of taking responsibility for more than just yourself and how you would fill that responsibility is of course up to you.

And of course in my work, in the book, I use the metaphor of the Truman Show, that famous movie from the 1990s about a man who is the only man that doesn't realise that his entire life is a reality television show and that everybody in his life is an actor or an actress, and the movie ends with him realising that everything is fake and he runs away and escapes. And my argument would be: well, you're also in your own movie. There is no escape. The exit door of your studio just leaves into another studio, so the question is what are you going to do with all these cameras pointed at you? With everybody trying to act and live the best they can in your world? Are you still going to make it all about yourself and try to fit in and be nice? Or are you going to become a bit more comfortable with showing the complexity of both who you are

and what the world is, and share in stories that are meaningful – and this is the most important thing – that are *shared* stories, and not just stories about you.

And really both points are in essence mainly about acknowledging that living in media is not good or bad but should be done mindfully and on a very mundane level that is for me the primary takeaway here.

## Appendix Three

This appendix contains relevant information regarding one of the attempts made in 2013 to transform *Busking the Silence* into a public installation, including the project outline for City of Sydney's *Art and About* festival, and support letters from ABC Arts and ABC Radio National.

### PART 1

#### Artwork statement

People are connected like never before: not directly to each other, but to devices. *Busking the Silence* is an exploration of the urban paradox of loneliness in crowded places, and a celebration of street art's capacity to reconnect us with public spaces, and with each other.

*Busking the Silence* is a transmedia documentary presented in association with ABC Arts, which seeks to break new ground in its artistic fusion of digital and public spaces. Indeed, the project's form is part of its message, prompting a critical conversation about how use of digital devices affects the way live together in contemporary cities.

*Busking the Silence* combines elements of video art and installation art to recreate the space of the Devonshire street tunnel, and the experience of walking through it. Five independent, but visually connected videos introduce the documentary's six main characters: four buskers, one in each of the first four frames; me - the artist - sitting in the tunnel with a series of placards, occupying the fifth frame; and the main character - the anonymous individual, passing and passing across the five frames, between the camera and the buskers, enjoying the urban freedom to *not* be seen.

These five videos are projected onto the walls of another public thoroughfare, such as Abercrombie Lane, and the passing pedestrian can see each of the buskers performing. However only the ambient noise of the Devonshire street tunnel is heard, unless the pedestrian pauses to watch a video for more than three seconds, in which case two things happen: that busker's music replaces the ambient sound track; and an animated corner of the video folds up, indicating more content beneath. This is the first of two primary layers of interactivity.

The second layer involves a symbolic act. If a person claps while watching the busker perform, the video projection of the busker in the Devonshire street tunnel is replaced with a first-person narrative photo-essay, in which the busker discusses his/her experiences of the city, busking, community, friendship, alienation and music. Behind the fifth video, of me in the tunnel, is a photo-essay that explicitly explores the urban paradox of loneliness in crowded places. Each photo-essay is approximately five-minutes long, and combines monochrome photography and videography with radio-style documentary narrative.

*Busking the Silence* is also being produced as a web documentary with a dedicated mobile .app, which will be downloadable at the Art and About installation via a QR Code that directs people to a download from the ABC Arts homepage, and also as a half-hour radio documentary for ABC Radio National. The mobile .app also contains a 10,000 word literary essay exploring community and connection in contemporary Sydney (draft

Included in Section 7). These various components will be launched the week of September 20. Finally, two of the featured buskers, Rich Noho and Liber Osorio, will busk periodically throughout the festival in adjacent public areas, adding an additional dimension of interactivity to the project. It's a truism that every person has a story to tell. *Busking the Silence* reminds us of the rich human tapestry of unknown life that surrounds us, and invites us to listen.

## PART 2 Project Methodology

*Busking the Silence* is in late production stage, both in terms of design and content, and from the outset the project has been envisioned as both a dynamic public art installation and innovative web documentary. A functioning prototype of the web documentary is included with this EOI in part Seven, and this should help illustrate the intended design and interactive functionality of the public installation, as it reflects that of the web documentary, and vice versa.

The public is the project's primary character. *Busking the Silence* recreates the banal experience of walking through a public thoroughfare, but invites us to be attentive to our immediate surrounds, and rewards attentiveness with music and story.

Abercrombie Lane is the ideal location for *Busking the Silence* because it is suitably dark for daytime video projection, and because it is a thoroughfare comparable to the Devonshire street tunnel. The five projectors will be rigged on two of the five-metre tall concrete pillars on the Lane's southern wall, allowing the projected videos to be separated by a distance of around three metres; close enough to show visual connection between the videos, but far enough apart to avoid too much audio cross-over. Each projector will be connected to a Mac mini computer, which will also be connected to an adjacent shotgun microphone and a web camera for motion detection. The web camera will detect when a person has paused to watch a video for more than three seconds, triggering the busker's music, and the microphone will register any claps that occur within that same space, triggering the busker's narrative story. The programming for the installation will be a combination of HTML5 and Max MSP.

The visuals will be projected downwards at a 20-degree angle onto large white sheets of non-porous art paper, glued to the brick and painted with screen goo. This surface will give a good gloss finish, providing the life-size projections with rich colour and depth, while also being easily removed and cleaned after the installation. Above each projection, suspended from the tension anchors already in-situ on the Northern walls, will be a small amplifier (Roland cube), delivering the ambient sound track, music, and narrative stories.

*Busking the Silence* is ambitious in terms of its innovative approach, but deliberately simple in terms of its delivery. Interestingly, the cabling and infrastructure for the current installation (Augmenting Spatiality, 2012)) need not be removed in order for *Busking the Silence* to be installed. The artist and his creative team are aware of Abercrombie Lane's historical significance, and this knowledge has informed the installation design, together with OHS and security considerations and the desire to house the necessary equipment in a manner that is subtle enough to escape notice. The public's attention will be drawn to the projections and soundscape, rather than the equipment that facilitates it.

Other venues would also be suitable for the project. The southern half of Hyde Park would suit the project well, for example, and *Busking the Silence* would be a wonderful accompaniment to *Sydney Life*, however some minor conceptual and technical changes would be needed to suit the larger venue. Martin Place would also work well.

Several other approaches to the interactive design of the work were considered, including throwing a coin into a bucket with a vibration sensor instead of clapping to trigger the narrative stories, or using smart phones to operate the functionality within the laneway. The creative team believes it has come up with the strongest venue-specific concept, in terms of intuitive functionality, inclusiveness and feasibility, however the artist will welcome input and negotiation with the City with regards the final concept, venue and delivery of the work in association with ABC Arts.

### PART 3 ARTIST/TEAM CV'S

**Benjamin Ball** is a documentary photographer, writer and new media artist who works across a variety of media with the aim of fostering empathy, curiosity and imagination. Benjamin's writing and still photography has been featured in The Sydney Morning Herald, The Guardian (UK), Tempo (Indonesia), Semana (Colombia), New Internationalist and New Matilda. His contributions to the SBS.com web documentary *Africa to Australia* won an Australian Webbie award and were featured in the digital stream of the 2011 Banff Film Festival. Benjamin's independent projects have been awarded the Wanda Jamrozik prize for human rights journalism, and continue to be used by NGOs working with internally displaced peoples in Colombia ([www.theuprooting.com](http://www.theuprooting.com)). In 2011 Benjamin collaborated with Persian sound artist Vedad Famourzadeh to produce an interactive audiovisual exhibition titled *Sydney Tehran Intersection*, which was exhibited in both cities (<http://vimeo.com/51510682>). Benjamin also lectures in online journalism and photography at the University of Technology, Sydney, and University of Wollongong. He lives between Bulli, NSW, and Medellín, Colombia, with his wife and extremely cheeky three-year old son.

**Vedad Famourzadeh** is a sound artist, music ethnologist and qualified vibro-acoustic/signal processing engineer from Sharif University of Technology and Institut de Recherche et Coordination Acoustique/Musique (IRCAM). As a sound artist and composer, Vedad explores the integration of soundscapes with the diverse musical traditions of Iran. Vedad is currently a PhD candidate at the University of Technology, Sydney, where he also teaches creative soundscapes, interactive design and MSP programming. His research explores the confluence of interactive sound installations and Persian music ontology. Vedad has previously collaborated with Benjamin Ball on the 2011 audiovisual installation, *Sydney Tehran Intersection* (see link above).

**Johnny Bojacá** is a digital media designer based between Bogotá, Colombia, and Sydney, Australia. Johnny specialises in HTML5 and Flash programming, digital animation and mobile .app creation for corporate, private and NGO sectors. Johnny's 2009 collaboration with Benjamin Ball, [www.theuprooting.com](http://www.theuprooting.com) / [www.eldesarraigo.com](http://www.eldesarraigo.com), (a bilingual interactive photo essay about forced displacement in Colombia) was awarded the Wanda Jamrozik prize for human rights journalism and continues to be used as an education tool for displaced communities in Bogotá.

**Samuel Suarez** is a mechanical engineer and project manager with experience in projects of all sizes, from modular shop fit-outs, through to the design, construction and installation of some of Sydney's most notable building facades, including the current

Frasers redevelopment of the Carlton Brewery site. Samuel has previously collaborated with artists such as sculptor Jarrod Taylor, whom he helped as technical coordinator and operations manager of the production and installation of his consecutive works at Sculpture By The Sea. Samuel enjoys focusing his engineering expertise on the creation and realisation of unique art pieces that successfully merge innovative form with intuitive functionality.



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March 04, 2013

To Whom It May Concern:

RE – *BUSKING THE SILENCE*

I write in support of Benjamin Ball's Expression of Interest to present *Busking the Silence* as part of the City of Sydney's 2013 Art & About program.

At this point in the development of this trans-media documentary it is clear that the project has potential to break new ground in digital storytelling by fusing the online and public space. *Busking the Silence* shines a spotlight on the fascinating musicians who populate the Sydney busking scene. Through the interactive, site-specific installation and online component this project has potential to reach a national audience beyond Art & About's Sydney base. We are not in a position to confirm our commitment to the presentation of *Busking the Silence* at this stage however we are keen to help Benjamin develop the project over the next couple of months.

Yours sincerely,

Katrina Sedgwick  
Head of Arts, ABC TV



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5 March 2013

To whom it may concern,

This letter is to confirm that RN's [360documentaries](#) program has commissioned Benjamin Ball to make a 30 minute radio version of his project **Busking the Silence**.

We are very excited to be working with Benjamin because his ideas about; community, solitude, interaction in public space and the place of music in all this are thoughtful and interesting. We like the fact that the buskers he chose come from a variety of ethnic backgrounds. They are all articulate and will give our audience a unique perspective on Sydney and how it's experienced at a street level.

We are particularly delighted to have an ABC website host such quality multimedia pieces and to bring them to the RN audience. The photography in the pieces is superb and they've been edited in an evocative yet clearly communicative way.

If his application for an installation is successful we would time the broadcast of the radio program to coincide with the installation. This will maximise publicity for the installation and give our audience the chance to experience another iteration of the project.

Yours

CLAUDIA TARANTO  
Executive Producer Features

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