

Reality Jamming: Beyond Complex Causality in Mediated Cultural Systems

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Introduction

It is clear through experience that there is some significant relationship between media representations and cultural effects. Yet as practice leads theory through the sheer velocity of technological change, experience outstrips theoretical understanding of the relationship between the sign and the signified, the simulation and the social, the model and the real. For example, the international crisis provoked by the publication of a cartoon of the prophet Mohammed as an unexpected result of networked global media; or the pre-mediated violence of the 'trenchcoat mafia', where signification was an *intentional* precursor to real effects; or the trajectory of 'celebrity', where the 'virtually real' is designed, acted out, consumed and fed back in a co-evolving eco-system of signification. The proliferation of digital media means it is increasingly important to understand *interaction* per se, especially the interaction between systems of signification and the real. This paper argues that all representational systems have a performative capacity for transformation of the real and that signification is a dynamic intermediate realm between the real and the conceptual which can be best understood as a realm of invocation.

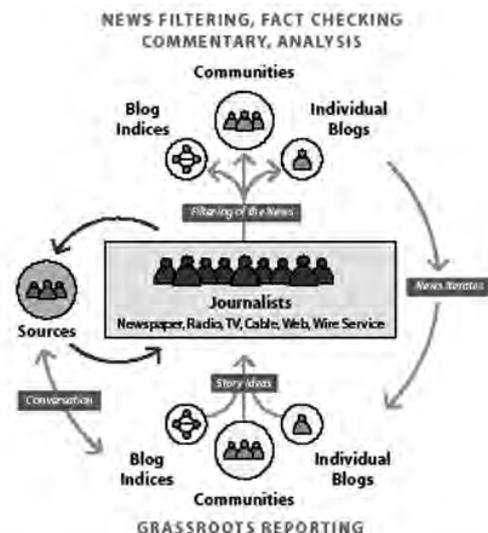
Mediated Cultural Systems

Within a 'media' culture, lived experience qualifies some significant relationship between representations and cultural effects. We can, for example, observe that successful advertising campaigns increase sales, for example, the 'Coca Cola Oceana — a little wild' campaign promoted their 'rotational flavour' strategy and resulted in a significant market share growth 'in just four weeks'.¹ This type of promotional activity is well accounted for in the post structuralist approach of Media & Cultural Studies,² where effective analytical methodologies that are used to 'deconstruct'³ existing cultural 'texts' are also successful design methodologies for commercial success in industry.⁴ The same discourse also suggests that advertising campaigns create definable 'pseudo communities'⁵ where one shares a sense of identity anchored around one's choice of products. Do you 'subscribe' to Coke or Pepsi; Volvo or Audi ? Are

you a 'Marlborough Man'? Even an EEG machine⁶ can detect ones exposure to 'putative branding moments within TV commercials'.⁷

Of course, sometimes, unpredictable behaviours emerge, such as the unexpected adoption of Kangol headwear by members of the US hip hop community in the 1980s: Run DMC were wearing the same wool beret as English Boy Scouts. Umberto Eco used the term 'aberrant decoding'⁸ to describe such behaviour; where [an artefact] is 'decoded' by means of a different code from that used to 'encode' it. Stuart Hall suggested three positions for interpretation of cultural artefacts; 'dominant', 'negotiated' and 'oppositional'.⁹ It is clear that free will plays a dynamic part in interpretive processes; we cannot define a deterministic 'cause and effect' between advertising and behaviour because human beings can make choices.

This notion of 'human agency'¹⁰ is usually set out itself as an oppositional position to the determinism of the physical sciences, polarising the 'technological' (the advert) from the 'natural' (behaviour). This enforces an



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Figure 1: The emerging media eco-system

extreme dualism¹¹ that underpins the conceptual void we now struggle to fill as experience outstrips theoretical understanding of the relationship between the sign and the signified, the simulation and the social, the model and the real, as practice consistently leads theory through the sheer velocity of technological change.

Digital media is forcing our understanding of interactivity as ‘the terms art, design and media converge into a process driven, performative event that demonstrates emergence through autopoietic processes’;¹² as computerised communications technology accelerates Benjamin’s ‘photographic speech’ to the speed of digital *discourse*¹³ (Figure 1: The Emerging Media Eco System) Whilst the post-structuralist notions of ‘the death of the author’¹⁴ and the ‘open text’¹⁵ prefigures the processes of digital interaction to an extent, the void is the *relationship* between polarized conceptual constraints inherited from Rene Descartes.¹⁶ We struggle to understand the *interaction* between the conceptual (non material) and the physical (material).

Complex Causality

‘Systems thinking’ is a dialectical method that breaks with logical analyses to emphasize relationships and interactions. It can be traced from Socrates through Hegel to pragmatics¹⁷ and is applied as a trans-disciplinary methodology.¹⁸ It is a way of thinking rather than a specific set of rules, and has given rise to ‘complex systems theory’ for systems that demonstrate specific capacities of ‘complexity’ such as ‘self organization’ and ‘emergence’.¹⁹ For our purpose here, “complex systems” are systems that are diverse and made up of multiple interdependent elements, that are often ‘adaptive’, in that they have the capacity to change and learn from... and can be understood as emerging from the interaction of autonomous agents — especially people.²⁰

This concern with relationships and interaction, systems and complexity, has run concurrent to the computer age and some degree of technologically deterministic ‘medium theory’²¹ has to be acknowledged. The parallels between digital media and complex systems have not gone unnoticed. Indeed the notion of the ‘networked society’ is not new either.²² In his 2006 paper, Lars Qvortup describes the internet itself as a ‘complexity machine’ and described the international crisis provoked by the publication of a cartoon of the prophet Mohammed, as a ‘communications event’.²³

Whilst it was clearly an emergent property of the complex system of networked global media, the pre-mediated violence of the ‘trenchcoat mafia’, who carried out the Columbine High School massacre, demonstrated

representation as a direct and intentional precursor to real effects. For the perpetrators, the value of the virtual reality of signification were understood as greater than the value of the physically enactive domain. This is intentional rather than ‘emergent’ behaviour and raises questions about their intuitive understanding of the ‘kinship’ of representation to the real. For example, in the sciences, representation is conventionally referential, used for ‘tagging’ elements of an external reality; whilst for the humanist, representation is an ideological construct through which a sense of reality is defined. It appears the ‘trenchcoat mafia’ understood themselves purely as part of a representational system and designed and acted out their own ‘communications event’ using themselves as part of the signification process; reality jamming indeed.



Figure 2: People as co-evolving media products

The trajectory of ‘celebrity’ too demonstrates a dubious type of ‘communications event’ with a ‘feedback loop’ between the real and the representational. Here, the signification is designed, acted out, consumed and fed back in a co-evolving eco system of signification. How can we realistically describe a type of causal representational system where the ‘celebrity’, whether semiotic, metaphoric or simulated, seems to eventually become their own avatar, often suffering an extreme, sometimes literal, loss of self? (Figure 2: People as Co-evolving Media Products) Whilst it is important not to confuse the meaning of useful new terms for addressing digital media phenomena it is also important to acknowledge how the virtual presences of systems of significations, that we are only just beginning to be able to describe, interact with enactive reality.

The recent work of Ira Livingston sets out the notion of an ‘autopoiesis’ or ‘self-making’ capacity for language based systems; a concept originated in the biological sciences²⁴ and later expounded into social systems.²⁵

Livingstons 'autopoetics' or 'the convergence of words and things' is based on the proposition that language is 'of the world, like galaxies and ecosystems...it participates in what it represents'.²⁶ Does this mean that language shows true complex systems behaviour through a complex interaction not just with itself but with the environment?

Reality Jamming

Whilst post-structuralism prefigures the processes of digital interaction to an extent, a complex notion of language systems accounts for emergent *behaviours* rather than simply emergent *interpretations*. This immediately crosses the Cartesian void between signification and the real. Furthermore, it appears that some type of autopoiesis is at play here *across* that void; not only that language systems and behaviour patterns are complex systems themselves, and part of the complex *nested* system of culture in dynamic, *interactive* relation, but that they are equally 'real'.

In this realm of autopoetics, signification is best understood as a dynamic intermediate realm between the real and the conceptual; an *interactive* interface to the real, which can best be understood as a realm of invocation. In this light, all representational systems have a performative capacity for transformation of the real as they are *played out in use*. A notion that, if fully understood, might mean the western press would not have published a cartoon of the Prophet Mohammed in the first place.

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 - 7 Braeutigam, S. 2004. "Neuroeconomics-From neural systems to economic behaviour." In *Brain Research Bulletin* 67 (5), 15 November, pp. 355-360
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