

THEORIZING NEW MEDIA IN A GLOBAL CONTEXT

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New media provides contexts for global-scale interaction, but theorization around new media rarely intersects with globalization discourses. In a field largely driven by technological innovation, critical theory may be seen as unproductive and thus extraneous. This paper examines the intersection of digital media's practice and criticality, moving away from theories of form and procedure, and situating its scholarship in a global ethical context.

Few contest the idea that advanced computational and communications technologies play a definitive role in today's global economic, social, cultural, political and even ecological orders. The evidence of this exists in technologies used to implement the internationalization of management, the globally shifting labor pools, the enabling of a cosmopolitan managerial elite, transnational banking and other such signs of economic globalization. It lives as well in social, political and cultural manifestations of globalization such as WikiLeaks and the social-media fueled Arab Spring.

While new media forms have a transnational impact, and profoundly influence globalization, one sees little critique or consciousness around issues of globalization as the context in which new media discourses take place. What is the disconnect between new media's global impact, and new media's discourses, which maintain little engagement with theorization of larger social and ethical concerns? In the context of rapid technological evolution, should the study of digital and electronic culture mirror ethical concerns, given the urgent social and political work that needs doing in the world? For example, universal rights discourses might be one key area where computational and communications technologies have contributed to major shifts by increasing the fluidity with which global subjects move across traditional nation-state borders, in keeping with shifting international demands for both the managerial class and labor. Considering the rights of diasporic, transnational and migrant subjects requires greater attention as their global numbers increase.

How can these and other issues of social uplift extend to an area that is fundamentally concerned with perpetual innovation, and often situated in a profit-oriented context? If we are to attempt an approach to electronic and communication technologies that contains within it a self-critical apparatus for contemplating the effects of those works we make and use, then what critical tools can we implement to greatest effect? Moreover, is the discourse of digital media the place to advance these and other theoretical concerns? I should make clear that I make this critique on the meta-level; it is not aimed at individual artists, many of whose works persistently address the important questions of their day. New media is not a unified discipline, but what one might more generally call an 'area' or 'movement' in scholarship, but it does possess a kind of centripetal pull of ideas that requires careful consideration 'as though it were' a discipline. This discussion is aimed at the level of discipline, and to safeguard the future relevance of what we as new media scholars do. Innovation and profit does not assure lasting significance, and in this regard our fledgling movement has serious problems.

This conglomeration we call "new media" is a truly interdisciplinary undertaking that has no fixed academic home, and by extension no organized intra-disciplinary self-regulating value system or ethics – in other words, no cohesive philosophical discourse. D.N. Rodowick's *Reading the Figural* [1] and Mark Hansen's *New Philosophy for New Media* [2] and the interventions collected in CTheory.net form three

examples of scholarly interventions into philosophical engagement with new media, but these are asymptomatic of the more dominant practice-oriented sector of new media scholarship.

In 2008, the worth of theory for digital media was explored in a public discussion between Ian Bogost and Jay David Bolter at the Georgia Institute of Technology. During this debate, entitled, "The Value of Theory in Digital Media Studies," both scholars pointed to the fundamental tension between what Bolter identified as the "procedural" side of digital media and the "culturalist" or critical theoretical side. Bolter asserted that critical theory is not designed to help make things; that it is not in effect "productive" in the sense of resulting in a product. Rather it is there to make an intervention in the form of critique. On this point there was no dissent from Bogost, who likewise indicated that, "theory's purpose is to change perspective, not create output." [3] And they were absolutely correct in this from the standpoint of measurable outcomes—the critique critical studies offers could be characterized as a drag on productivity, a kind of noise that disrupts the flow of creative efficiency. This is because its concerns are not with production, but with honing a set of critical tools that vigorously assess the products of a given society for their underlying meanings and ramifications. In its questioning and self-reflection, it can be seen to slow immediate results.

Bogost and Bolter debated how the procedural and critical culturalist aspects might better dovetail, a question that hounds combined theory-practice programs. Bogost suggested that the two elements mesh well in digital art production; others suggested this is demonstrated in design, or that it may be the role of scholarship to integrate the two. This seems to configure the coming together of theory and practice as the purview of artists and other 'creative' types, to relegate it to the aesthetic or the academic, as opposed to centralizing its importance for the procedural.

What is this apprehensiveness around theory? For me this question, with its attendant procedural / culturalist tension are connected to a larger contemporary crisis of higher education, particularly the conflict between the classical understanding of the university as cultivating intellectual acuity, versus the more neoliberal iteration of the university as training ground for capitalist enterprise. Writing on this crisis of academia, Gregory Jay characterized it as such:

[a] fundamental tension arises between the academic mission of preparing students to be critical citizens and neoliberalism's demand that they subordinate themselves to the dictates of the market. Obviously, neoliberalism has no need or desire for academic research that questions its operation, as such criticism creates 'inefficiency' in the market. [4]

Even the tools themselves beg not to be analyzed. The clean, abstract shapes of laptops and mobile devices, inscrutable and minimalist, disguise their histories and origins. This is often only ruptured by accident or technical glitch, for example in the famous so-called "iPhone girl" photos snapped of a young Asian factory-line worker that went out on the new device, discovered later to the delight of its owner. [5] That amusement is only possible because of the seemingly insurmountable distance between the phone's assembler and owner, which those images instantly broached. This factory image again masks another representation: that of the waste management and reclamation issues that plague mass production. On the back end of the technological cycle, is the ecological crisis of e-waste; armies of unfortunates must contend with the tidal wave of obsolescent technology, and run the gauntlet between spaces of production and capitalist excretion that mar the environment.

Indeed, there are many ways in which the theoretical contemplation seems not to mesh well with production. Setting these aside, I would argue that theory's presence in new media scholarship chafes at sensitivities that arise out of an overarching shortcoming in the area: we lack an ethos. That is to say, we may refer to ethics-based theory in our products, but that is very different from having an ethical grounding that guides, provides purpose and articulates a code for the movement. Theory provides the tools for ethical debate and self-critical reflection, and surely serves to articulate concerns that have ethical ramifications. Yet is often seen as an external punitive force, and hence side-stepped. However, rejecting the influence of theory as secondary to production does not displace the central importance of ethics. Ethics in the disciplinary methodologies of new media should and do precede theorization; ethics should act as agreed-upon fair and honest practices in advance of whatever our diverse disciplinary outcomes may be.

Technological development is ideologically configured as ultimately good, necessary and fundamental for progress; that the moral obligation to pursue innovation outweighs the ensuing sacrifice. It carries with it the promise of social betterment through technology, including but not limited to true democratic inclusion, a global web of consciousness and the outstripping of bodily limitations such as mortality. [6] However, there remains the matter of bodies, and how advanced technology imposes itself upon subjects in the world. An array of activist scholars have challenged the ethical neutrality in technology discourses and their visual cultures, including among others: Lisa Nakamura, María Fernández, Thuy Linh Tu, Wendy Hui Kyong Chun, Jennifer Gonzalez and Coco Fusco. "For all the celebration of mobility and fluidity," Fusco has written, "digital technology organizes a world economic order that thrives on a global labor pool of poor non-white people – for whom 'access' to many critical signifying practices – legal, symbolic, and electronic – is diminished and even denied." [7] Fusco along with many others argue for a more equitable set of relations between a global North and South, calling into question the duress of technological production on the bodies of disenfranchised laborers. These scholars are undertaking important work that deconstructs the present-day continuation of imperialist expansion and the rhetoric of technology as progress. They importantly tackle the issues of post-colonialism, hybridity, mobility, migration and Diaspora as they intersect with new media.

My inquiry here, however, is not a cultural studies-based critique of technology. Rather, in a larger sense we have to ask ourselves as members of a common set of interests: what is important about what we do? What is so consequential that intellectuals from other fields would look to our theorists to identify key ethical concerns related to technology in the world and, more importantly, derive useful reasoning that can have impactful resonance outside the hermeneutic specialty of new media? What is it that new media studies produces that is different from what Silicon Valley does? How can our field of collective interests have global relevance – or, lacking core values – even sustain itself? What do we hope to achieve if we do not have ethics?

Consider one lynchpin of internal ethical conflict at play in new media: the imperative to constantly innovate drives technology forward – and this drive is embodied both by those who undertake the challenge of developing new technologies, as well as those who intercede, such as hackers and other interventionists. Alexander Galloway describes this imperative as a part of a larger discussion on the political dimensions of network architecture. "Hackers," Galloway explains, "don't care about rules, feelings, or opinions. They care about what is true and what is possible. And in the logical world of computers, if it is possible then it is real. *Can* you break into a computer, not *should* you or is it *right* to...In fact, possibility often erases the unethical in the mind of the hacker." [8] Galloway refers to hackers and their relationship to code and specifically protocols, but the paradigm of "possibility eras[ing] the unethical" is quite

apropos to other areas of technological development, where the pursuit of innovation demarks a frontier to be discovered as an inevitable form of progress. Technological innovation races toward the promise of a horizon where the better, modern, efficient and more functional purportedly hold liberatory potential for culture. As a result, technological industry seems to function largely autonomously from a self-critical apparatus beyond that demanded by capitalism, to guide its aims. Hackers react to institutional systems, certainly tangle with the machine, and are ideologically configured as having an antagonistic relationship with capitalism. But as Galloway points out, this is separate from having an ethical framework to guide them. And in the end, their efforts may ultimately and inadvertently contribute to the strengthening of the controlling logics of protocols, by pointing out the loopholes and backdoors that are eventually sealed. Certainly, Galloway's perspective generalizes; still, it illustrates its point well. It is this question of the ethical (as opposed to merely the possible) that requires a critical foundation, one built from sound theoretical building blocks.

I have here characterized a series of challenges, each nested inside the next: new media exists within a context of globalization, while its theorization seems not to acknowledge major ethical concerns of that context. Meanwhile new media studies is currently driven by its procedural side, while its diminished critical culturalist side seems to contradict the logic of production. However, without critical examination and contextualization, much of what new media does is indiscernible from research and development – a compromised position in the face of the tech industry and its resources. When subject to the accelerated expectations of technological innovation, such production can only temporarily impress audiences, before facing the certain doom of obsolescence. Armed with an ethics and a set of critical tools with which to self-evaluate, new media scholars and producers social actors with agency to affect global outcomes, and whose cultural context is inextricable from their innovation.

One need make no argument about the connectedness between cultural context and the tools that form the object of study for new media scholarship. Noted sociologist and scholar of globalization Saskia Sassen, in example, contests the dominant understanding of the relationship between digital and non-digital spaces. Sassen argues that the dematerialization associated with digital media is largely myth, and in fact the goings on of the datasphere are deeply bound to the material world.

The digital is imbedded in the larger societal, cultural, subjective, economic, and imaginary structurations of lived experience and the systems within which we exist and operate. At the same time, through this embeddedness, the digital can act back on the social so that its specific capabilities can engender new concepts of the social and of the possible. [9]

The feedback loops that she describes between the digital, the non-digital, the social and the possible evidences an interplay that is mutually influential; it potentially opens up new and fertile territories for conceptualizing our sphere of activity not as hermetic but rather engaged with context and subjectivity.

This is one of innumerable possible perspectives, the lenses for which already exist in the array of disciplinary approaches associated with critical studies such as sociology, philosophy, political science and media studies. Seyla Benhabib, a venerated political theorist, utilizes liberal democratic philosophy to reason through the ethical challenges heightened by globalization. Benhabib emphasizes moving from the rights of citizens as defined by national identities and borders, to universal human rights, which acknowledges the increasingly porous nature of borders as a result of global flows of capital, products and bodies. [10] Manuel Castells, arguably one of the most important living sociologists studying the impacts of globalization and advanced communications technologies, has recently published *Communication Power*, which ambitiously undertakes to characterize sweeping impacts of both online social media and

traditional mass media—what he calls "mass self-communication" and its reshaping of global power. [11] Clearly discourse of advanced technology is inextricable from ethical conversation. Technology implements ethics, whether or not its makers self-consciously select or even recognize their ethical positioning. In fact, I would go so far as to say that forms of technology are ethical philosophy in practice. Hence, it is imperative to bring sophisticated language and critical frameworks that enable ethical conversation to take place, within discussions of new media.

As a relatively young area of interest, new media studies need only look to another recent disciplinary struggle, namely that between art history and visual studies, for a cautionary and instructive example. Mieke Bal, a noted cultural critic and theorist, has written of art history and its notorious lack of "methodological self-reflection," which led to a profound crisis around its object of study, and the subsequent formation of alternative approaches to visual and material culture. [12] The emergent scholarly discipline, visual culture studies, promoted analysis that brought rigorous self-criticality to the table. This radically reconfigured the objective of study not in terms of a pedigreed object, but always with a skeptical relationship to the object in its various webs of relation. Meaning, then, does not issue only from the form in itself but also context—and the analytical tools possess a kind of 'self-sharpening' feature. In time, the academy has seen the melding of art history with visual studies; many departments now bear both names and support both approaches as a means of ensuring the contemporary relevance of art history, while grounding visual culture in the object to some degree.

How can we, by developing a problematized relationship to our own material, continue to evolve what we do as new media experts? Now that we are finally moving beyond defining what new media is or isn't we are free to move on to possible tasks such as probing technological essentialism in its many forms, unveiling the workings and political urgencies of advanced technology in context, and advancing a commitment to new internationalism as constitutive of technological experience.

I would like to return once more to the conflicts of the "procedural" versus the "critical cultural"—a dualism that falsely divides the intellectual labor around technology, and that needles the anxieties of both theorists and technologists, particularly those occupying the academy. Theorists are anxious that they aren't understood to be 'making' anything, that they aren't productive, per se, and more likely slow the process of production. Further, in the cases where theorists are not also 'makers,' their contribution may be diminished as navel-gazing and interloping into a conversation occurring between producers. However, contrary to the idea that critical theory produces nothing, the intellectual discernment and criticality developed from training in critical methods is measurable as well, however along much longer timeframes and long-tail effects. The rigor of the resistance criticality provides refines the procedural dimension, but also introduces theoretical and ethical self-regulation to its operations. One senses, in kind, the angst of technological producers who are constantly anxious that they don't make anything important or lasting. Innovation is always overtaken by the subsequent innovation, seemingly without end. The solution to this quandary lies in the development and valuing of a theoretical feedback loop regulated by an ethical framework that takes into account the context and players through which technological progress is made possible, and through which it enacts itself. This should be a rigorous, systemic part of the scholarship that influences the outcomes of production. The digital media we use are not neutral tools, but enact social, ethical and moral worldviews. Theorists and producers needn't worry: the work we do is relevant; but before we study digital materiality, presentation, aesthetics or evolution, before we theorize the algorithmic or the informational, we need core ethics. For a disciplinary sense of self-assuredness that can enable digital media theory and production to do good work in intellectual culture and in the world, it requires a strong ethical philosophy.

References and Notes:

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