

FEEDBACK AS SELF-PERFORMANCE

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Media-activists of the 60s and 70s (Ant Farm) presented the possibility of autonomy through media. Although now realized through platforms such as Twitter and Facebook, self-performance is of a different character than the one envisioned by the media guerrillas of the past. Feedback loops of non-scripted TV serves as an aid to political reasoning promoting a culture of entrepreneurship, privatisation, volunteerism, and responsabilisation.

The August 28, 2008 issue of Time magazine shows an image of a man who has been caught up in a dispute between drugs gangs in Mexico. He is lying dead in the street, surrounded by a group of onlookers. What makes this a very contemporary image is that the bystanders are taking photos of the man's body with a variety of devices (video, digital, phone cameras). In fact, the people in the picture who are taking a photo of the body almost outnumber those who are not.

Making sense of the economy of such an image requires an understanding of a piece of information (in this instance a photograph) as a unit of exchange in which our attention, and the attention of others, is accorded value. We do not know what happened with those pictures of the dead Mexican, but some may have been posted on the Internet to become units of exchange on blogs, on-line communities and chat lines. We ourselves are involved in an information economy every time we log on to Facebook or send an e-mail, wherever the circulation of information increases our visibility. The economy of such an image is founded on our activity as self-performing subjects, feeding back and exchanging information in order to improve our stake within this economy.

This edict to perform has become a foundational part of the structure of contemporary media, in which TV shows stitch together handy-cam footage of hapless viewers bumping into lampposts or falling off ladders, while amateur videos of natural disasters and terrorist attacks provide the 'authentic image' to the aesthetic of print and TV news. Everyday Joes and Janes confess all, undergo extreme makeovers, have their rides pimped, have their homes refurbished, have their children reconditioned, have their marriages fixed, choose new partners, choose new wallpaper, are fed by celebrity chefs, are starved by personal trainers, run the marathon, make poverty history, bungee-jump wearing a red nose and clown's shoes. In this arena of the information economy, we increasingly use media to police ourselves, maintain ourselves, judge ourselves against others, regulate our behaviour, measure ourselves and measure others. In an era in which direct government intervention is despised (I don't need handouts from Big Government!), new technologies of self-control have grown to replace this intervention, as a greater part of our lives is taken up with the 'work of watching' and the 'work of being watched.'

The reality TV show, for instance, is predicated on the idea of feedback. Indeed, one might understand the new media mix as a circuit of production that collapses the difference between producer and consumer. This has very interesting consequences economically, because although we work in order to make this type of media happen, we are paid little or no money for the work we do – in fact, in most cases we pay out of our own pocket. The profit from our work actually goes to the (TV) production companies, the phone companies and big media conglomerates, along with the media retail outlets that sell

us upgraded equipment. As a consequence of all this, we can no longer say we live in 'the society of the spectacle.' We are everything but passive consumers of products; we live in a society of self-performance in which we constantly present ourselves, and excite the interest of others in what we do; and this self-performance is a commodity that has a price. I don't think I'm straying into the realms of science fiction if I suggest that contemporary media have created a form of immediacy in which human subjectivity is the principal object of production and consumption, and in which media serve to facilitate this production and consumption. Laurie Ouellette and James Hay, in "Better Living Through Reality TV" (2008), link Foucault's idea of 'governmentality' with current liberal strategies of 'privatisation,' 'volunteerism,' 'entrepreneurism,' and 'responsibilisation' which extend media production into the realm of political reasoning. It is the regime of constant testing, perpetual visibility and self-reliance that governs and produces its subject. [1]

So the training and testing which is central to reality TV shows, along with the personal investments in the aims of the show ('this will teach me something, make me a better person'), serve to translate the negatives of travail and ruthless competition into the positives of self-improvement and personal empowerment.

The imperative to perform has been a subject of discussion for some time, of course, and has been variously described as "the experience economy" (Gilmore and Pine), "the immaterial economy" (Lazarato), "the control society" (Deleuze), "the mode of information" (Poster), "the weightless society" (Leadbeater), "The Networked Society" (Castells), and as the engine behind "the new spirit of capitalism" (Boltanski & Chiapello). All attempt to explain the shift from a manufacturing society, which is based on physical labour and material products, to a networked society, which is based on the exchange of information. The network, or non-hierarchical 'trading zone' are, as I mentioned before, cybernetic notions, and we use them all the time to understand and 'narrativise' the world we live in. The very idea of feedback within the social network is one of those ideas that shape our world. It is inescapable; but it is possible to trace its origins, chart its effects and establish some sort of critical position.

For his part, Andrejevic insists on an understanding of capitalism as a surveillance system that grows more sophisticated as it develops. I find Andrejevic's broad stroke very convincing: since the time of the enclosure of land we have seen a "consolidation of techniques not only of monitoring workers but of centralising control over the manufacturing process." [2] So the phases are: (a.) the enclosure of land, which peaked in the middle of the eighteenth century; (b.) Taylorism in the nineteenth century (scientific management which resulted in the division of material and mental labour); (c.) Fordism in the twentieth century (subordination of the time of the workers to that of the assembly line and the 'de-naturing' of labour); and (d.) the digital age, which promises to restore time to the individual and release the wage slaves from the factory floor, etc. In fact this promise is not fulfilled, because the digital age actually represents a re-ordering of the relations between production and consumption, between 'our own time' and 'the company's time.' As we increasingly attempt to sell ourselves as a commodity, our subjecthood becomes one of perpetual presentation; and of course, we seek to find our destiny in the new subjecthood, which we are forced to invent for ourselves.

Andrejevic argues that the panopticism of modernity (surveillance through monitoring individuals in the workplace – Taylor's scientific management) has given way, through the processes of new techniques of information management, to the dual action of panopticonism (the few watching the many) and synopticonism (the many watching the few). The synoptic is the regime of the celebrity, of course.

Through the necessary exchange of data about ourselves, we are being herded into what Andrejevic calls a 'digital enclosure' in which our identities (or profiles) can be constructed, in which we can be identified as very particular consumers, and in which ultimately our own performance becomes a commodity for exchange. So the digital age essentially represents a new discipline of management relations, and perhaps it would be fair to say, a new discipline of self-management – and as the volunteerist models such as The Big Society are rolled out, a new era of political management.

The feedback loop of reality TV should be understood in this broader social and technological context, as an agent of governance. The word 'cybernetics' (the science of feedback systems) shares its etymological roots with the verb 'to govern', incidentally. It is also worth remembering that within cybernetics the 'control' of a system comes from within that system, it is not imposed from the outside.

How the TV industry understands itself in the light of this shift to self-performance is demonstrated by Chris Short, head of interactive media at Endemol UK, the producers of the reality TV franchise Big Brother. Back in 2002 he said: "We're creating a virtuous circle that excites the interactive audience about what's going on in the house, drives them toward the TV program, the TV program will drive them to the internet, the internet to the other ways they can get information, and the other ways back to the TV." [3] The non-scripted TV show is at the high end of an imperative to perform, which can be seen in any number of instances where the community is sold back to itself as a commodity.

To understand how the ontology of television has shifted during recent years, it is worth looking again at Richard Serra and Charlotta Schoolman's "Television Delivers People" (1973), which came at a time (the early to mid-1970s) when a number of artistic and critical projects suggested alternatives to the mainstream. These included TVTV (Top Value Television), Raindance, Videofreak and Ant Farm. Along with them came a new critical literature, including Michael Shamburger's seminal book "Guerrilla Television" (1971) and the magazine "Radical Software" (1970–1974), which provided a platform for critique and media activism. All combined the collectivist ideals of the 1960s with the potentially democratising (new) technologies of video, closed-circuit TV and cable. Here I would like to take a little time to investigate how these TV Guerrillas helped provide the conditions that made the current media feedback loop of self-performance possible.

Back in 1973, the TV audiences described by Serra were 'distracted' by scripted entertainment or information (news and quiz shows for instance) while advertisers smuggled messages into their consciousness. The model for the television economy (in the United States at least) traditionally worked on the principle that the networks would lease programs from production companies and take in the advertising revenue.

In contrast, Chris Short, our man from Endemol, describes a media economy in which the advertiser is no longer necessarily linked to the show's production, because the money from telephone calls and SMS text messages to the show provides at least a portion of its income. In 2005 Endemol's combined U.S. productions took money from 300 million calls and SMS messages. Also in 2005, the U.S. "American Idol" registered 500 million votes (63 million for the final) at 99 cents a pop. Although still providing a comparatively small portion of the overall budget, these methods of income generation for programmes are growing fast within the non-scripted sector of television production, with product placement – in which products are scripted into non-scripted shows – rising from a once-negligible share to 10% of the total share of the income of non-scripted U.S. programmes. Another source of income which allows production companies to compete (at increasingly tight margins) in an industry where four out of five new

shows fail, is the sale and export of formats in which the 'playbook' and the 'coach' are provided on a franchise basis (the European companies Endemol and FremantleMedia are very successful at this). [4]

The radical change in the network-advertiser system, which served the industry for decades, is graphically illustrated by the example of the reality TV hit show "Survivor." In 2002 CBS agreed to share the advertising revenue from "Survivor" with its producer, Mark Burnett, who also agreed to pre-sell the sponsorship. Burnett secured eight advertisers who each paid \$ 4 million for each show. This was a combination of product placement, commercial time and a link through the website. By contrast, the last season of "Friends," which was produced by Warner Brother for NBC, cost \$ 7.5 million dollars per episode, with \$6 million going to the six principal actors.

"Survivor" wasn't only cheap to produce (a reality TV show cost \$ 700,000 – \$ 1,250,000 per hour at the time) and effective at generating advertisement revenue, it was also popular, even outperforming NBC's highly popular and hugely expensive "E.R." in ad revenue. The success of the new model represented a tipping point for the broadcasters, and by 2005 20% of primetime programme hours consisted of non-scripted content. This 'Wild West' of television is funded through an increasingly diverse mix of sources, from SMS to product placement and online advertising through web sites that feed into the TV show. Furthermore, increasingly sophisticated techniques for analysing how effective a particular advert might be, have resulted in more diverse and sophisticated targeting strategies by advertisers; a process that will certainly be intensified and refined even further using profiling work from Google and Facebook. [5]

It's ironic that the abolition of the space between production and consumption – which we now see happening as viewers provide funds for production via phone calls to the show, as well as their on-screen and online presence while they deliberate the fate of a particular contestant – was the dream of the architects of the critical, self-initiated media that grew out of the counterculture of the 1960s. They wanted to see the end of the grip, which the networks and advertisers held over the industry. Central to this critique was the notion that in order to break the circuit of monopoly of production, it was necessary to dive into the feedback loop of self-production. Indeed, the rise of the participant – the self-performing subject – is no coincidence in an economy where visibility itself has become a commodity.

In the July 1968 supplement of the Whole Earth Catalog, Ant Farm published their text on the "Cowboy Nomad" in which they cast themselves as cybernetic cowboy prophets of the future technological revolution:

YET THERE ARE COWBOY NOMADS TODAY, LIVING IN ANOTHER LIFE STYLE AND WAITING FOR ELECTRONIC MEDIA, THAT EVERYONE KNOWS IS DOING IT, TO BLOW THE MINDS OF THE MIDDLE CLASS AMERICAN SUBERBANITE. WHILE THEY WAIT THE COWBOY NOMADS (OUTLAWS) SMOKE LOCO WEED AROUND ELECTRIC CAMPFILES. [6]

Michael Shamberg, in "Guerrilla Television" (1971) wrote about how the feedback technology of TV might be used to break the stronghold the networks and advertisers held over the minds of viewers back in the early 1970s: "[strategies] might include tactics like going out to the suburbs with video cameras and taping commuters. The playback could be in people's homes through their normal TV sets. The result might be that businessmen would see how wasted they look from buying the suburban myth." [7]

For both Ant Farm and Shamberg, the subject ready for change is 'the corporation man,' the individuals conditioned by the commodity-centred media to accept their hollow existences and to throw in their lot with the commodity. This is the endpoint of spectacular media: the message (the advert) stops when it

hits the consciousness of the consumer, who, intoxicated by the spirit of bad faith, will go forth and buy stuff.

Both Ant Farm and Shamberg understood that in order to break the hold of monopoly, it was necessary to include the viewer into the feedback loop of production: making the viewers visible to themselves would create a shift in the economic logic of the media. The understanding of TV as a feedback mechanism that could 're-form' an individual's behaviour had already been appreciated by social psychologist Stanley Milgram, who conducted the infamous "obedience to authority" experiment in 1961. Milgram was greatly influenced by Allen Funt's "Candid Camera" (perhaps the TV format closest to present-day shows). [8]

So how do we explain the schizophrenia of a radicalism that mistrusted (monopoly) technology, and a radicalism that looked to technology for the solution?

Fred Turner's book "From Counterculture to Cyberculture" distinguishes two political trends that emerged in the United States during the 1960s. These can be broadly categorised as the 'new left' and the 'counterculture'. The new left emerged from the civil rights and anti-war movements. This group understood the world as driven by the material realities of class, race and labour. The second group, the counterculture, emerged from a heady blend of beatnik literature and cybernetics, which understood individuals and systems (including ecological systems) as components of networks that exchanged information with others. In this scheme, the media could be understood as a media-ecology, the evolution of which could be redirected. Those experimenting with LSD understood the drug as a technology of the self, as a form of software that could change the program of a group or an individual.

The underlying philosophy of the network was also a major inspiration for the 700,000 individuals who set up a series of communities throughout the United States between 1967 and 1971. [9]

By the early 1970s, cybernetic ideas were axiomatic amongst the media activists who had grown through the counterculture of the 1960s; the Portapak and video represented new tools that would extend the scale of human potential, just as every other new technology had done before, while loopholes in licensing regulations (in relation to the new technology of cabal) allowed for new modes of production. As Ant Farm put it, riffing on media theorist Marshall McLuhan's idea of the global village:

HOW LONG WILL IT TAKE THE LAG
IN OUTLOOK AND CONSCIOUSNESS TO WHIPLASH
FITTING THINKING/IDEAS TO TECHNOLOGICAL CAPABILITIES. [10]

Shamberg, in "Guerrilla Television," made the radical distinction between a materialist left and a cybernetically inclined left: "True cybernetic guerrilla warfare means re-structuring communications, not capturing existing ones" [11] while Timothy Leary, championing the new technology of mind-expanding drugs, stated that "[People should]...drop out, find their own center, turn on, and above all avoid mass movements, mass leadership, mass followers." [12] The imperative for the individual to re-program (rather than for the masses to revolt) reaches its technocratic extreme with Buckminster Fuller's assertion that "revolution by design" will mean that "politics will become obsolete." [13]

During the 1960s and 70s, European media critique (grounded in Marxism) tended to emphasise the alienation engendered by the mass media – the distance between the viewer and the shining world of

the commodity. In the United States, by contrast, a network of activists, architects, artists and critics experimented with a different understanding of the medium of TV. Freed from the stranglehold of the networks, accessed by the people, TV could become a technology for 'making' reality. Groups like Ant Farm, Raindance, Radical Software and Videofreak (versed in the cybernetic lore of Norbert Wiener and Marshall McLuhan) tested the possibilities of a medium that could indeed produce a participating network, which would collapse the difference between performer and producer. What could not be easily foreseen though, was how the feedback loop of TV could turn the commodity and the commodity-performer into same thing. The feedback loop of non-scripted TV shows is where the contestant and the prize find their equivalence. It is here that the figure and ground that defined the old mass media are replaced by a constant oscillation between producer and consumer.

References and Notes:

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4. *Ibid.*, 141-152.
5. *Ibid.*, 152-164.
6. Felicity D. Scott and Ant Farm, *Living Archive Allegorical Time Warp* (New York: Actar, Columbia Gsapp, 2008), 13.
7. David Joselit, *Feedback* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2010), 101.
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9. Fred Turner, *From Counterculture to Cyberculture* (Chicago, IL: University Of Chicago Press 2008), 81.
10. *Ibid.*, 87.
11. Timothy Leary et al., "The Houseboat Summit," *Leary.ru*, <http://www.leary.ru/download/leary/T.Leary,%20G.Snyder,%20A.Watts,%20A.Ginsberg%20-%20Summit.pdf> (accessed June 11, 2012).
12. David Joselit, *Feedback* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2010), 101.
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