LEA

LEONARDO ELECTRONIC ALMANAC

What is the relationship between contemporary digital media and contemporary society? Is it possible to affirm that digital media are without sin and exist purely in a complex socio-political and economic context within which the users bring with them their ethical and cultural complexities? This issue, through a range of scholarly writings, analyzes the problems of ethics and sin within contemporary digital media frameworks.

WITHOUT SIN
FREEDOM AND TABOO IN DIGITAL MEDIA

LEONARDO ELECTRONIC ALMANAC, VOLUME 19 ISSUE 4

Without Sin: Freedom and Taboo in Digital Media

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NSA: No Speaking Aloud, Anonymous, 2013.

Post-Society:
Data Capture and Erasure
One Click at a Time

"Oh, in the name of God! Now I know what it feels like to be God!"

Frankenstein (1931)

They must have felt like gods at the NSA when they discovered that they were able to spy on anyone. What feels ridiculous to someone that works with digital media is the level of ignorance that people continue to have about how much everyone else knows or can know about 'you.' If only people were willing to pay someone, or to spend a bit of time searching through digital data services themselves,they would discover a range of services that have started to commercialize collective data: bought and sold through a range of semi-public businesses and almost privatized governmental agencies. Public records of infractions and crimes are available for 'you' to know what 'your' neighbor has been up to.These deals, if not outright illegal, are characterized by unsolved ethical issues since they are a 'selling' of state documents that were never supposed to be so easily accessible to a global audience.

Concurrently as I write this introduction, I read that the maddened Angela Merkel is profoundly shocked that her mobile phone has been tapped into – this is naive at best but also deeply concerning: since to not understand what has happened politically and technologically in the 21st century one must have been living on the moon.Perhaps it is an act or a pantomimestagedfor the benefit of those 'common' people that need to continue living with the strong

belief or faith that their lives are in good hands, that of the state.

Nevertheless it speaks of a 'madness' of the politician as a category. A madness characterized by an alienation from the rest of society that takes the form of isolation. This isolation is, in Foucauldian terms, none other than the enforcement of a voluntary seclusion in the prison and the mad house.

The prisons within which the military, corporate, financial and political worlds have shut themselves in speak increasingly of paranoia and fear. As such the voluntary prison within which they have sought refuge speaks more and more the confused language that one may have imagined to hear from the *Stultifera Navis*.

Paranoia, narcissism and omnipotence, all belong to the delirium of the sociopaths, [1] who push towards the horizon, following the trajectory set by the 'deranged minds.'

It is for the other world that the madman sets sail in his fools' boat; it is from the other world that he comes when he disembarks. [2]

This otherworldliness – this being an alien from another world – has increasingly become the characteristic of contemporary political discourse, which, detached from the reality of the 'majority' of people, feeds into the godlike complex. Foolishness and lunacy reinforce this perspective, creating a rationale that drives the

Stultifera Navis towards its destiny inexorably, bringing all others with them.

Having segregated themselves in a prison of their own doing, the politicians look at all others as being part of a large mad house. It is from the upper deck of a gilded prison that politicians stir the masses in the lower decks into a frenzy of fear and obedience.

Why should it be in this discourse, whose forms we have seen to be so faithful to the rules of reason, that we find all those signs which will most manifestly declare the very absence of reason? [3]

Discourses, and in particular political discourses, no longer mask the reality of madness and with it the feeling of having become omnipotent talks of human madness in its attempt to acquire the impossible: that of being not just godlike, but God.

As omnipotent and omniscient gods the NSA should allow the state to 'see.'The reality is that the 'hands' of the state are no longer functional and have been substituted with prostheses wirelessly controlled by the sociopaths of globalized corporations. Theamputation of the hands happenedwhile the state itself was merrily looking somewhere else, tooblissfullybusy counting the money that was flowing through neo-capitalistic financial dreams of renewed prosperity and Napoleonic grandeur.

The madness is also in the discourse about data, deprived of ethical concerns and rootedwithinperceptions of both post-democracy and post-state.So much so that we could speak of a post-data society, within which the current post-societal existence is the consequence of profound changes and alterations to an ideal way of living that technology – as its greatest sin – still presents as participatory and horizontal but not as plutocratic and hierarchical.

In order to discuss the present post-societal condition, one would need first to analyze the cultural disregard that people have, or perhaps have acquired, for their personal data and the increasing lack of participation in the alteration of the frameworks set for post-data.

This disregard for personal data is part of cultural forms of concession and contracting that are determined and shaped not by rights but through the mass loss of a few rights in exchange for a) participation in a product as early adopters (Google), b) for design status and appearance (Apple), c) social conventions and entertainment (Facebook) and (Twitter).

Big data offers an insight into the problem of big losses if a catastrophe, accidental or intentional, should ever strike big databases. The right of ownership of the 'real object' that existed in the data-cloudwill become the new arena of post-data conflict. In this context of loss, if the crisis of the big banks has demonstrated anything, citizens will bear the brunt of the losses that will be spread iniquitously through 'everyone else.'

The problem is therefore characterized by multiple levels of complexity that can overall be referred to as a general problem of ethics.Of data, interpreted asthe ethical collection and usage of massive amounts of data. Also the ethical issues of post-data and their technologies has to be linked to a psychological understanding of the role that individuals play within society, both singularly and collectively through the use of media that engender new behavioral social systems through the access and usage of big data as sources of information.

Both Prof. Johnny Golding and Prof. Richard Gere present in this collection of essays two perspectives that, by looking at taboos and the sinful nature of technology, demand from the reader a reflection on

the role that ethics plays or no longer plays within contemporary mediated societies.

Concepts of technological neutrality as well as economic neutrality have become enforced taboos when the experiential understanding is that tools that possess a degree of danger should be handled with a modicum of self-control and restraint.

The merging of economic and technological neutrality has generated corporate giants that have acquired a global stronghold on people's digital data. In the construction of arguments in favor or against a modicum of control for these economic and technological giants,the state and its political representatives have thus far considered it convenient not to side with the libertarian argument, since the control was being exercised on the citizen; a category to which politicians and corporate tycoons and other plutocrats and higher managers believe they do not belong to or want to be reduced to.

The problem is then not so much that the German citizens, or the rest of the world, were spied on. The taboo that has been infringed is that Angela Merkel, a head of state, was spied on. This implies an unwillingly democratic reduction from the NSA of all heads of state to 'normal citizens.' The disruption and the violated taboo is that all people are data in a horizontal structure that does not admit hierarchical distinctions and discriminations. In this sense perhaps digital data are violating the last taboo: anyone can be spied upon, creating a truly democratic society of surveillance.

The construction of digital data is such that there is not a normal, a superior, a better or a worse, but everything and everyone is reduced to data. That includes Angela Merkel and any other head of state. Suddenly the process of spying represents a welcome reduction to a basic common denominator: there is no

difference between a German head of state or a blue collar worker; the NSA can spy on both and digital data are collected on both.

If anything was achieved by the NSA it was an egalitarian treatment of all of those who can be spied upon: a horizontal democratic system of spying that does not fear class, political status or money. This is perhaps the best enactment of American egalitarianism: we spy upon all equally and fully with no discrimination based on race, religion, social status, political affiliation or sexual orientation.

But the term spying does not quite manifest the profound level of Panopticon within which we happen to have chosen to live, by giving up and squandering inherited democratic liberties one right at a time, through one agreement at a time, with one click at a time.

These are some of the contemporary issues that this new LEA volume addresses, presenting a series of writings and perspectives from a variety of scholarly fields.

This LEA volume is the result of a collaboration with Dr. Donna Leishman and presents a varied number of perspectives on the infringement of taboos within contemporary digital media.

This issue features a new logo on its cover, that of New York University, Steinhardt School of Culture, Education, and Human Development.

My thanks to Prof. Robert Rowe, Professor of Music and Music Education; Associate Dean of Research and Doctoral Studies at NYU, for his work in establishing this collaboration with LEA.

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Lanfranco Aceti
Editor in Chief, Leonardo Electronic Almanac
Director, Kasa Gallery

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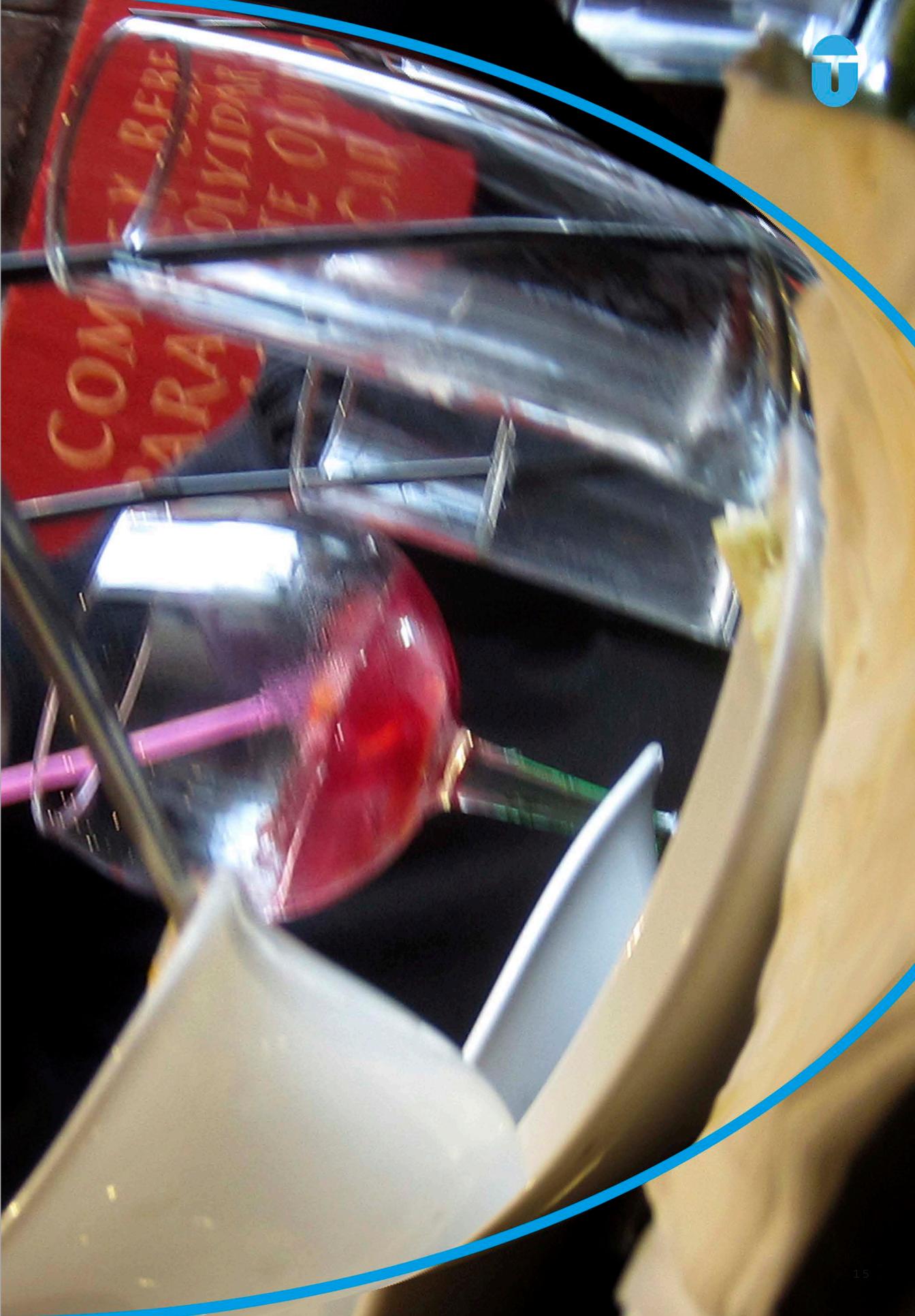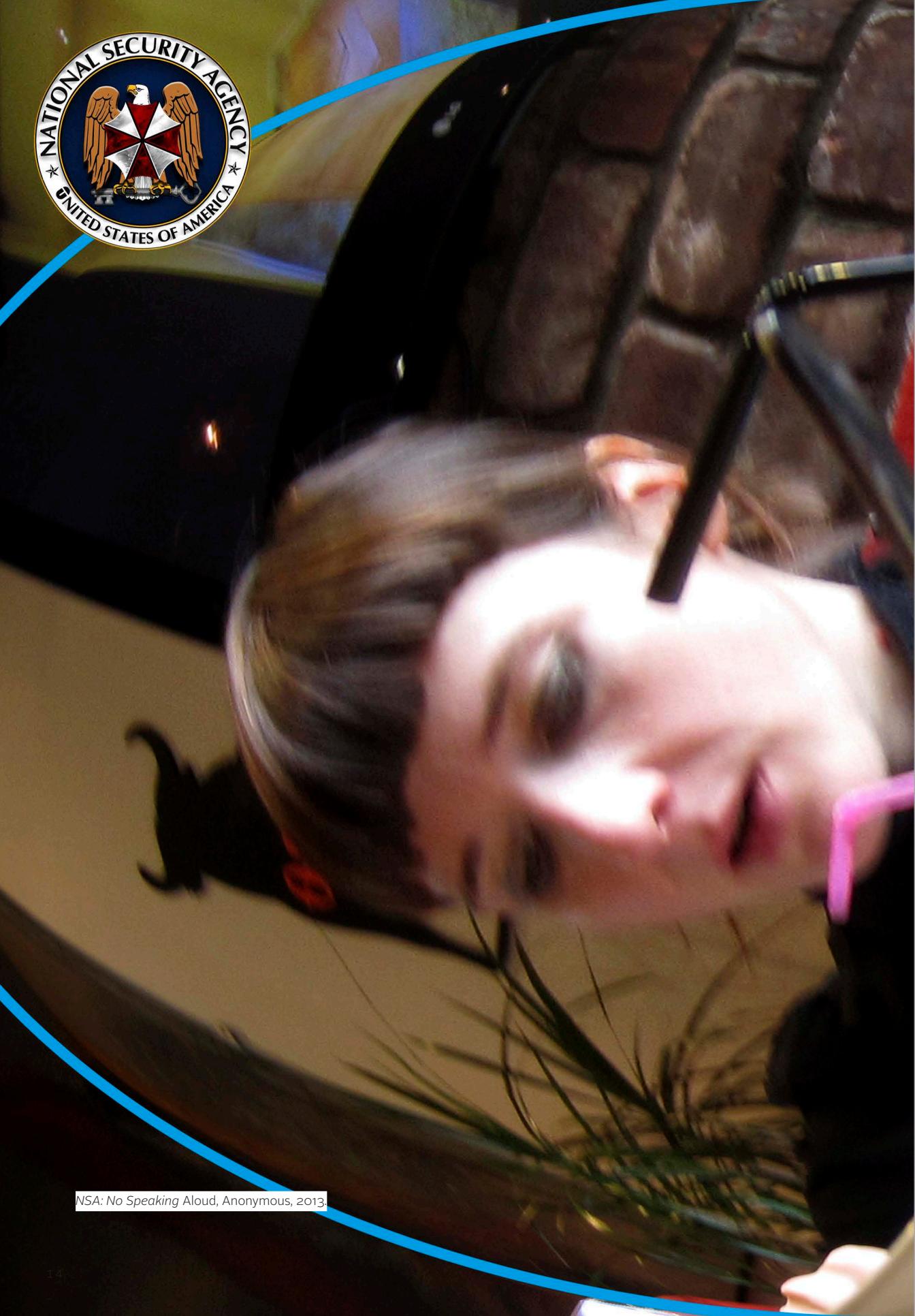
NSA: No Speaking Aloud, Anonymous, 2013.

Without Sin: Freedom and Taboo in Digital Media

INTRODUCTION

"Without Sin: Freedom and Taboo in Digital Media" is both the title of this special edition and the title of a panel that was held at ISEA 2011. The goal of the panel was to explore the disinhibited mind's ability to exercise freedom, act on desires and explore the taboo whilst also surveying the boarder question of the moral economy of human activity and how this is translates (or not) within digital media. The original panelists (some of whom have contributed to the this edition) helped to further delineate additional issues surrounding identity, ethics, human socialization and the need to better capture/understand/perceive how we are being affected by our technologies (for good or bad).

In the call for participation, I offered the view that contemporary social technologies are continuously changing our practical reality, a reality where human experience and technical artifacts have become beyond intertwined, but for many interwoven, inseparable – if this were to be true then type of cognizance (legal and personal) do we need to develop? Implied in this call is the need for both a better awareness and jurisdiction of these emergent issues. Whilst this edition is not (and could not be) a unified survey of human activity and digital media; the final edition contains 17 multidisciplinary papers spanning Law, Curation, Pedagogy, Choreography, Art History, Political Science, Creative Practice and Critical Theory – the volume attempts to illustrate the complexity of the situation and if possible the kinship between pertinent disciplines.

Human relationships are rich and they're messy and they're demanding. And we clean them up with technology. Texting, email, posting, all of these things let us present the self, as we want to be. We get to edit, and that means we get to delete, and that means we get to retouch, the face, the voice, the flesh, the body – not too little, not too much, just right. [1]

Sherry Turkle's current hypothesis is that technology has introduced mechanisms that bypass traditional concepts of both community and identity indeed that we are facing (and some of us are struggling with) an array of reconceptualizations. Zygmunt Bauman in his essay "From Pilgrim to Tourist – or a Short History of Identity" suggests that:

One thinks of identity whenever one is not sure if where one belongs; that is, one is not sure how to place oneself among the evident variety if behavioral styles and patterns, and how to make sure that people would accept this placement as right and proper, so that both sides would know how to go on in each other's presence. 'Identity' is the name given to the escape sought from that uncertainty. [2]

Our 'post-social' context where increased communication, travel and migration bought about by technological advances has only multiplied Bauman's conditions of uncertainty. Whilst there may be aesthetic tropes within social media, there is no universally accepted authority within contemporary culture nor is there an easy mutual acceptance of what is 'right and proper' after all we could be engaging in different iterations of "backward presence" or "forward presence" [3] whilst interacting with human and non-human alike (see Simone O'Callaghan's contribution: "Seductive Technologies and Inadvertent Voyeurs" for a further exploration of presence and intimacy).

Editing such a broad set of responses required an editorial approach that both allowed full expansion of each paper's discourse whilst looking for interconnections (and oppositions) in attempt to distil some commonalties. This was achieved by mentally placing citation, speculation and proposition between one another. Spilling the 'meaning' of the individual contributions into proximate conceptual spaces inhabited by other papers and looking for issues that overlapped or resonated allowed me formulate a sense of what might become future pertinent themes, and what now follows below are the notes from this process.

What Social Contract?

Hereby it is manifest that during the time men live without a common power to keep them all in awe, they are in that condition which is called war; and such a war as is of every man against every man. (Thomas Hobbes in chapter XIII of the *Leviathan* [4])

Deborah Swack's "FEELTRACE and the Emotions (after Charles Darwin)," Johnny Golding's "Ana-Materialism & The Pineal Eye: Becoming Mouth-Breast" and Kriss Ravetto's "Anonymous Social As Political" argue that our perception of political authority is somewhere between shaky towards becoming erased altogether. Whilst the original 17th century rational for sublimating to a political authority – i.e. we'd default back to a war like state in the absence of a binding social contract – seems like a overwrought fear, the capacity for repugnant anti-social behavior as a consequence of no longer being in awe of any common power is real and increasingly impactful. [5] Problematically the notion of a government that has been created by individuals to protect themselves from one another sadly seems hopelessly incongruent in today's increasingly skeptical context. Co-joined to the dissipation of perceptible political entities – the power dynamics of being 'good' rather than 'bad' and or 'sinful' appears to be one of most flimsy of our prior social borders. The new reality that allows us to transgress and explore our tastes and predictions from a remote and often depersonalized position feels safer (i.e. with less personal accountability) a scenario that is a further exacerbated space vacated by the historic role of the church as a civic authority. Mikhail Pushkin in his paper "Do we need morality anymore?" explores the online moral value system and how this ties into the deleterious effect of the sensationalism in traditional mass media. He suggests that the absence of restrictive online social structure means the very consciousness of sin and guilt has now changed and potentially so has our capability of experiencing the emotions tied to guilt. [6] Sandra Wilson and Lila Gomez in their paper "The Premediation of Identity Management in Art & Design – New Model Cyborgs – Organic & Digital" concur stating that "the line dividing taboos from desires is often blurred, and a taboo can quickly flip into a desire, if the conditions under which that interaction take place change."

The Free?

The issue of freedom seems to be where much of the debate continues – between what constitutes false liberty and real freedoms. Unique in their own approach Golding's and Pushkin's papers challenge the premise that is implied in this edition's title – that 'Freedom and Taboo' even have a place at all in our contemporary existence as our established codes of morality (and ethics) have been radically reconfigured. This stance made me recall Hobbes's first treaty where he argued that "commodious living" (i.e. morality, politics, society), are purely conventional and that moral terms are not objective states of affairs but are reflections of tastes and preferences – indeed within another of his key concepts (i.e. the "State of Nature") 'anything goes' as nothing is immoral and or unjust. [6] It would 'appear' that we are freer from traditional institutional controls whilst at the same time one could argue that the borders of contiguous social forms (i.e.

procedures, networks, our relationship to objects and things) seem to have dissipated alongside our capacity to perceive them. The problematic lack of an established conventional commodious living such as Bauman's idea that something is 'right and proper' is under challenge by the individualized complexity thrown up from our disinhibited minds, which can result in benign or toxic or 'other' behaviors depending on our personality's variables. [7] Ravetto describes how Anonymous consciously inhabits such an 'other' space:

Anonymous demonstrates how the common cannot take on an ethical or coherent political message. It can only produce a heterogeneity of spontaneous actions, contradictory messages, and embrace its contradictions, its act of vigilante justice as much as its dark, racist, sexist, homophobic and predatory qualities.

Perception
Traditionally good cognition of identity/society/relationships (networks and procedures) was achieved through a mix of social conditioning and astute mindfulness. On the other hand at present the dissipation of contiguous social forms has problematized the whole process creating multiple social situations (new and prior) and rather than a semi-stable situation (to reflect upon) we are faced with a digital deluge of unverifiable information. Perception and memory comes up in David R. Burns's paper "Media, Memory, and Representation in the Digital Age: Rebirth" where he looks at the problematic role of digital mediation in his personal experience of the 9/11. He recalls the discombobulating feeling of being: "part of the digital media being internationally broadcast across the world." Burns seeks to highlight the media's influence over an individual's constructed memories. From a different perspective Charlie Gere reminds us of the prominence (and shortcomings) of our ocular-centric perspective in his discussion of "Alterity, Pornography,

and the Divine" and cites Martin Jay's essay "Scopic Regimes of Modernity" [8] which in turn explores a variety of significant core concepts of modernity where vision and knowledge meet and influence one another. Gere/Jay's line of references resurrect for the reader Michel Foucault's notion of the "Panopticon" (where surveillance is diffused as a principle of social organization), [9] Guy DeDord's *The Society of the Spectacle* i.e. "All that once was directly lived has become mere representation") [10] and Richard Rorty's *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (published in 1979). [11] The latter gave form to an enduringly relevant question: are we overly reliant on a representational theory of perception? And how does this intersect with the risks associated with solipsistic introjection within non face-to-face online interactions? The ethics of 'looking' and data collection is also a feature of Deborah Burns's paper "Differential Surveillance of Students: Surveillance/Sousveillance Art as Opportunities for Reform" in which Burns asks questions of the higher education system and its complicity in the further erosion of student privacy. Burn's interest in accountability bridges us back to Foucault's idea of panoptic diffusion:

He who is subjected to a field of visibility, and who knows it, assumes responsibility for the constraints of power; he makes them play spontaneously upon himself; he inscribes in himself the power relation in which he simultaneously plays both roles; he becomes the principle of his own subjection [12]

In panoptic diffusion the knowingness of the subject is key – as we move towards naturalization of surveillance and data capture through mass digitization such power relationships change. This is a concern mirrored by Eric Schmidt Google's Executive Chairman when considering the reach of our digital footprints: "I don't believe society understands what happens when everything is available, knowable and recorded

by everyone all the time." [13] Smita Kheria's "Copyright and Digital Art practice: The 'Schizophrenic' Position of the Digital Artist" and Alana Kushnir's "When Curating Meets Piracy: Rehashing the History of Unauthorised Exhibition-Making" explore accountability and power relationships in different loci whilst looking at the mitigation of creative appropriation and reuse. It is clear that in this area serious reconfigurations have occurred and that new paradigms of acceptability (often counter to the legal reality) are at play.

Bauman's belief that "One thinks of identity whenever one is not sure if where one belongs" [14] maybe a clue into why social media have become such an integral part of modern society. It is after all an activity that privileges 'looking' and objectifying without the recipient's direct engagement – a new power relationship quite displaced from traditional (identity affirming) social interactions. In this context of social media over dependency it may be timely to reconsider Guy-Ernest Debord's 'thesis 30':

The externality of the spectacle in relation to the active man appears in the fact that his own gestures are no longer his but those of another who represents them to him. This is why the spectator feels at home nowhere, because the spectacle is everywhere. [15]

Underneath these issues of perception / presence / identity / is a change or at least a blurring in our political (and personal) agency. Don Ritter's paper "Content Osmosis and the Political Economy of Social Media" functions as a reminder of the historical precedents and continued subterfuges that occur in mediated feelings of empowerment. Whilst Brigit Bachler in her paper "Like Reality" presents to the reader that "besides reality television formats, social networking sites such as Facebook have successfully delivered a new form of watching each other, in a seemingly safe

setting, on a screen at home" and that "the appeal of the real becomes the promise of access to the reality of manipulation." [16] The notion of better access to the 'untruth' of things also appears in Ravetto's paper "Anonymous: Social as Political" where she argues that "secrecy and openness are in fact aporias." What is unclear is that, as society maintains its voyeuristic bent and the spectacle is being conflated into the banality of social media, are we becoming occluded from meaningful developmental human interactions? If so, we are to re-create a sense of agency in a process challenged (or already transformed) by clever implicit back-end data gathering [17] and an unknown/undeclared use our data's mined 'self.' Then, and only then, dissociative anonymity may become one strategy that allows us to be more independent; to be willed enough to see the world from our own distinctive needs whilst devising our own extensions to the long genealogy of moral concepts.

Somewhere / Someplace
Perpetual evolution and sustained emergence is one of the other interconnecting threads found within the edition. Many of the authors recognize a requirement for fluidity as a reaction to the pace of change. Geographer David Harvey uses the term "space-time compression" to refer to "processes that . . . revolutionize the objective qualities of space and time." [18] Indeed there seems to be consensus in the edition that we are 'in' an accelerated existence and a concomitant dissolution of traditional spatial co-ordinates – Swack cites Joanna Zylinska's 'human being' to a perpetual "human becoming" [19] whilst Golding in her paper reminds us that Hobbes also asserted that "[f]or seeing life is but a motion of Limbs" [20] and that motion, comes from motion and is inextricably linked to the development and right of the individual. But Golding expands this changing of state further and argues where repetition (and loop) exist so does a different experience:

The usual culprits of time and space (or time as distinct from space and vice versa), along with identity, meaning, Existenz, Being, reconfigure via a relational morphogenesis of velocity, mass, and intensity. This is an immanent surface cohesion, the compelling into a 'this' or a 'here' or a 'now,' a space-time terrain, a collapse and rearticulation of the tick-tick-ticking of distance, movement, speed, born through the repetitive but relative enfolding of otherness, symmetry and diversion.

Golding's is a bewildering proposition requiring a frame of mind traditionally fostered by theoretical physicists but one that may aptly summarize the nature of the quandary. The authors contributing to this edition all exist in their own ways in a post-digital environment, anthropologist Lucy Suchman describes this environment as being "the view from nowhere, detached intimacy, and located accountability." [21] Wilson and Gomez further offer a possible coping strategy by exploring the usefulness of Jay Bolter and Richard Grusin's "pre-mediation" as a means to externalize a host of fears and reduce negative emotions in the face of uncertainty. The imperative to create some strategies to make sense of some of these pressing issues is something that I explore in my own contribution in which I offer the new term *Precarious Design* – as a category of contemporary practice that is emerging from the design community. Precarious Design encompasses a set of practices that by expressing current and near future scenarios are well positioned to probe deeper and tease out important underlying societal assumptions to attain understanding or control in our context of sustained cultural and technological change.

Embodiment

In theory our deterritorialized and changed relationship with our materiality provides a new context in which a disinhibited mind could better act on desires and explore the taboo. Ken Hollings's paper "THERE MUST BE SOMETHING WRONG WITH THIS, SALLY... Faults, lapses and imperfections in the sex life of machines" – presents a compelling survey of the early origin of when humans began to objectify and try live through our machines starting with disembodiment of voice as self that arose from the recording of sound via the Edison phonograph in 1876. Golding and Swack mull over the implications of the digital on embodiment and what it means now to be 'human' as we veer away from biological truth and associated moral values towards something else. Sue Hawksley's "Dancing on the Head of a Sin: touch, dance and taboo" reminds us of our sensorial basis in which:

Touch is generally the least shared, or acknowledged, and the most taboo of the senses. Haptic and touch-screen technologies are becoming ubiquitous, but although this makes touch more commonly experienced or shared, it is often reframed through the virtual, while inter-personal touch still tends to remain sexualized, militarized or medicalized (in most Western cultures at least).

Within her paper Hawksley provides an argument (and example) on how the mediation of one taboo – dance – through another – touch – could mitigate the perceived moral dangers and usual frames of social responsibility. Swack raises bioethical questions about the future nature of life for humans and "the embodiment and containment of the self and its symbiotic integration and enhancement with technology and machines." Whilst Wilson and Gomez's go on to discuss *Bioprescence* by Shiho Fukuhara and Georg Tremmel – a project that provocatively "creates Human DNA trees by transcoding the essence of a human being within the DNA of a tree in order to create 'Living Memorials' or 'Transgenic Tombstones'" [22] – as an example of a manifest situation that still yields a (rare) feeling of transgression into the taboo.

CONCLUSION

In the interstices of this edition there are some questions/observations that remain somewhat unanswered and others that are nascent in their formation. They are listed below as a last comment and as a gateway to further considerations.

Does freedom from traditional hierarchy equate to empowerment when structures and social boundaries are also massively variable and dispersed and are pervasive to the point of incomprehension/invalidation? Or is there some salve to be found in Foucault's line that "'Power is everywhere' and 'comes from everywhere' so in this sense is neither an agency nor a structure," [23] thus nothing is actually being 'lost' in our current context? And is it possible that power has always resided within the individual and we only need to readjust to this autonomy?

Conventional political power (and their panoptic strategies) seem to be stalling, as efforts to resist and subvert deep-seated and long-held governmental secrecy over military/intelligence activities have gained increased momentum while their once privileged data joins in the leaky soft membrane that is the ethics of sharing digitally stored information.

Through dissociative strategies like online anonymity comes power re-balance, potentially giving the individual better recourse to contest unjust actions/laws but what happens when we have no meaningful social contract to direct our civility? Its seems pertinent to explore if we may be in need of a new social contract that reconnects or reconfigures the idea of accountability – indeed it was interesting to see the contrast between Suchman's observed 'lack of accountability' and the Anonymous collective agenda of holding (often political or corporate) hypocrites 'accountable' through punitive measures such as Denial-of-Service attacks.

Regarding de-contextualization of the image / identity – there seems to be something worth bracing oneself against in the free-fall of taxonomies, how we see, how we relate, how we perceive, how we understand that even the surface of things has changed and could still be changing. There is no longer a floating signifier but potentially an abandoned sign in a cloud of dissipating (or endlessly shifting) signification. Where once:

The judges of normality are present everywhere. We are in the society of the teacher-judge, the doctor-judge, the educator-judge, the 'social-worker'-judge; it is on them that the universal reign of the normative is based; and each individual, wherever he may find himself, subjects to it his body, his gestures, his behaviour, his aptitudes, his achievements. [24]

There now is no culturally specific normal in the diffuse digital-physical continuum, which makes the materiality and durability of truth very tenuous indeed; a scenario that judges-teaches-social workers are having some difficulty in addressing and responding to in a timely manner, an activity that the theoretically speculative and methodologically informed research as contained within this edition can hopefully help them with.

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. As perhaps Friedrich Nietzsche would argue... He has previously described "orgies of feelings" that are directly linked to our capacity to feel sin and guilt. "To wrench the human soul from its moorings, to immerse it in terrors, ice, flames, and raptures to such an extent that it is liberated from all petty displeasure, gloom, and depression as by a flash of lightning" Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Genealogy of Morals,* trans. Horace Samuel (New York: Russell and Russell, 1964), 139.

6. Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 409.

7. Consequential subsets within a disinhibited mind are dissociative anonymity (you don't know me) and dissociative imagination (its just a game), which can lead to benign actions such as random acts of kindness or being more affectionate or potentially toxic (exploring more violent assertive sides of ones nature) and 'other' behaviors.

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15. "The alienation of the spectator to the profit of the contemplated object (which is the result of his own unconscious activity) is expressed in the following way: the more he contemplates the less he lives; the more he accepts recognizing himself in the dominant images of need, the less he understands his own existence and his own desires. The externality of the spectacle in relation to the active man appears in the fact that his own gestures are no longer his but those of another who represents them to him. This is why the spectator feels at home nowhere, because the spectacle is everywhere." Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, Thesis 30.

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Content Osmosis and the Political Economy of Social Media

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CONTENT OSMOSIS

Content osmosis is an intangible mechanism that transfers certain characteristics of media's content into an audience, empowering them to feel as if these qualities are within themselves. This mechanism can make an audience feel more fashionable through fashionable content or more rebellious through rebellious content. Content osmosis can also be present when a person purchases a consumer product, but promotional media associated with the product – and not the product itself – determine which qualities are inherited by a consumer. In the field of fashion, for example, a person becomes fashionable not because of the clothing they wear, but through an intangible entity called 'fashionable' that becomes associated with a certain style or brand of clothing. This entity is brought into existence through various promotional media, including advertisements and fashion shows, but the fashionable entity will disappear when this style or brand is presented in mass media as being unfashionable – even though the actual clothing remains unchanged. If the 'fashionable' entity was actually contained within clothing, then mass media should have no influence on which styles and brands are fashionable or not.

ABSTRACT

This article explains the function of content osmosis within social media and it also provides historical examples of its use in the marketing of cigarettes, commercial films, and computers. The term 'content osmosis' has been coined to designate the transfer of certain characteristics of media's content into an audience, empowering them to feel as if these qualities are within themselves. Content osmosis has existed for decades within the belief that the consumption of specific products and services are determinants of one's personal identity, and this belief has evolved more recently into the notion that our social needs can be enhanced through participation in social media. A detailed example of content osmosis is provided through a character analysis of the 1953 film Roman Holiday, *a title that coincides with Baron George Gordon Byron's phrase for an event that uses human suffering for enjoyment or profit. This article proposes that the dominant purveyors of social media are using content osmosis as an effective mechanism for attracting audiences to embedded advertising, and that depictions of human tragedy are used to attract audiences who are interested in 'Schadenfreude'.*

Although the mechanism of content osmosis is not new, having existed for centuries within architecture, artwork, literature, religious texts, mass media, and consumer products, I am proposing 'content osmosis' as a term to emphasize the inconspicuous transfer of characteristics from media content to audience. The inheritance of these characteristics might occur for some people without an awareness of the mechanism, but this is desirable for vendors who use content osmosis to sell their products. A goal of this article is to enhance a reader's awareness of content osmosis and its function as a tool of persuasion.

A recent marketing strategy that incorporates content osmosis is 'emotional branding.' Marc Gobé, a well known advocate of this strategy, writes that emotional branding "focuses on the most compelling aspect of human character: the desire to transcend material sat-

isfaction and experience emotional fulfillment." [1] Consultant Graeme Newell states the process more clearly.

> *Emotional Marketing is messaging that builds your ego. It makes you feel smarter, bolder, more sophisticated, or just about any other emotion that is fundamental to your self-esteem. That is the genius of emotional marketing. It slips in under our radar.* [2]

The mechanism of content osmosis involves four components: media content, media characteristics, a commodity, and a recipient. The purpose of the media content is to accommodate the characteristics that will be transferred to recipients after they consume the designated commodity. An important requirement for the effectiveness of content osmosis is that recipients believe their identities are determined by

the products and services they consume. Psychologist Erich Fromm has written extensively on this topic, especially in *To Have or to Be* [3] and *The Art of Being*. [4] He writes, "In the property mode of existence the motto is: 'I am what I have,' while in the being mode of existence 'I am what I am.'" [5] The primary goal of this paper is to discuss the process of content osmosis within social media, and to propose that the features of this mechanism are the same when used with consumer products, films, or media. The majority of this paper will discuss how content osmosis is used within social media, and its relevance to advertising and taboo media content. The paper will present various financial and corporate details that pertain to certain entities involved with social media. Some of these statistics, such as Facebook's market value and user base, will have certainly changed by the time the paper is published and read. The purpose of supplying these details is merely to support the paper's general conclusion on the commodification of social media. Readers who are interested in current financial statistics on these entities can obtain them through the relevant sources listed in the endnotes.

TORCHES, DREAMS, AND COWBOYS

Torches of Freedom was an historical advertising campaign created in 1929 by Edward Bernays, a nephew of Sigmund Freud who is considered the father of public relations. [6] The American Tobacco Company had hired Bernays to remove the stigma of women smoking in public, and to encourage them to smoke the *Lucky Strike* brand of cigarettes. Few respectable women were smoking in public during that era, and it was legally banned in some US states. [7] Bernays's promotional strategy included the hiring of young women to smoke *Lucky Strikes* while marching in the 1929 Easter day parade in New York City. He also arranged for photographs and stories of the event to be presented the following day in newspapers, newsreels, and other "reading matter." [8] Bernays's approach was innovative because these promotional materials appeared to the public as being legitimate news rather than advertising. Allan M. Brandt, author of *The Cigarette Century* writes:

> *The manipulation of public opinion, values, and beliefs would, in the 1920s, become a dominant aspect of the consumer culture. It was at this time that blurring the line between advertising and the news became a critically important technique in marketing products of all kinds.* [9]

The other innovative aspect of Bernays's strategy was to frame the consumption of a product as a means to fulfill desires that are unrelated to the actual product. Bernays disseminated the notion that cigarettes were "torches of freedom" for women and that they could be equal to men by smoking in public. "The young women marched down Fifth Avenue puffing *Lucky Strikes,* effectively uniting the symbol of the emancipated flapper with that of the committed suffragist." [10]

Figure 1. *Lucky Strike, Girl In Red,* advertising photo for Lucky Strike, 1936. Original photo by Nickolas Muray. Uploaded by PDTillman. Used with permission via the Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 3.0 Unported license.

Leo Burnett created an advertising campaign in 1954 that was strategically related to *Torches of Freedom,* except it was targeted at male smokers who typically smoked unfiltered cigarettes. Burnett had been hired by the Philip Morris Company to create an advertising campaign that would encourage men to smoke Marlboro filtered cigarettes, a brand that had been marketed since the 1930's as a luxury cigarette for women. [11] Burnett's initial strategy was to present masculine images of the filtered cigarettes being smoked by "Sea captains, athletes, gunsmiths, and cowboys." [12] [13] Over its years of development, the campaign eventually focused on the iconic *Marlboro man* as a cowboy. [14]

> *The Marlboro cowboy suggested a mythic time, not only before the bureaucratization and urbanization of the twentieth century, but a time of simple pleasures, before the mid-century discovery that smoking brought risk and disease.* [15]

Both of these advertising campaigns used similar strategies for promoting the consumption of cigarettes. The effectiveness of these campaigns is based on the assumption that people want to be more than their perceived identities: that women and men both desire to be freer and more masculine. The marketing strategy embedded within these campaigns is that people could be persuaded to consume cigarettes for reasons other than the pleasures of smoking. Bernays acknowledged the incorporation of his uncle's ideas when he wrote in 1928:

> *It is chiefly the psychologists of the school of Freud who have pointed out that many of man's thoughts and actions are compensatory substitutes for desires which he has been obliged to suppress. A thing may be desired not for its intrinsic worth or usefulness, but because he has unconsciously come to see in it a symbol of something else, the desire for which he is ashamed to admit to himself.* [16]

"Life isn't always what one likes, is it?" says the newspaper reporter to a young princess who has run away from the demands of her noble life and inadvertently into the arms of the handsome but poor writer. [17] The princess is played by Audrey Hepburn, the reporter is Gregory Peck, and the film is William Wilder's *Roman Holiday* (1953). The reporter is initially reluctant to help the young woman, but he becomes interested after learning her true identity and by proposing to his editor that he can write an exclusive article about the princess for $5,000. The princess believes she is incognito and claims to be a runaway student, while the reporter states that he is a "fertilizer salesman." During their day together, the princess pretends to a be regular young woman visiting Rome, while Peck acts like an accommodating gentleman and pays for her small indulgences on borrowed money. After their 24 hour adventure is complete and the two characters have fallen in love, Hepburn grudgingly returns to her duty as a princess and acknowledges her role as a public relations agent for her country. Peck's character then decides he will not write the article, apparently because his love for the princess is more important than his need of money.

Roman Holiday presents audiences with a romantic scenario in which audience members might imagine themselves to be the beautiful princess or the handsome, noble-hearted reporter who has fallen in love with her. And viewers of the film whose level of prosperity is below that of the aristocracy may also feel enlightened by the notion that the simpler things in life are the envy of the ruling class, and that gentlemanly conduct is nobler than exploitation, even when the potential victim is wealthy.

> *But, while the heroes in [the real] Hollywood are those with the most money, in the movies we find the opposite extreme. The wealthy tycoon is almost always the villain and the hero is the man of good will. The hero or heroine may be rich, but wealth*

does not give them their status. Often we are asked to admire the poor little rich girl who breaks away from her luxurious environment to marry the poor hero whom she loves. [18]

Various forms of media have been used throughout history to provide humanity with the archetypal personas that have contributed to our social order. These characters are often depicted as being godlike, with lives that are seemingly more meaningful and exciting than our own. [19][20] Epic poetry, religious texts, sculpture, and painting performed a social function in older times that is now provided through mass media, especially cinema. "Hollywood is engaged in the mass production of prefabricated daydreams," writes Hortense Powdermaker in her 1950 book, *Hollywood, the Dream Factory: an Anthropologist Looks at the Movie Makers.* [21] Like Hollywood films, the *Torches of Freedom* and *Marlboro Man* campaigns persuaded consumers that a transcendence of reality could be achieved by experiencing their products. This transcendence can supposedly be obtained through purchasing a packet of cigarettes or a ticket to a film.

Another example of this phenomenon is the *Get a Mac* advertising campaign that presented television audiences with two young men, one stating that he is a Mac and the other that he is a PC. [22] Through specific mannerisms and various scenarios, the 'Mac guy' is presented as a laid-back, capable and trustworthy man, while the 'PC guy' is presented as an overweight and incompetent nerd who tries to deceive his customers. [23] The apparent implication of the *Get a Mac* campaign is that owners of Mac and PC computers are like the characters being depicted. Many consumer products – including luxury cars, designer clothing, and running shoes – supposedly provide their customers with admirable qualities that are unrelated to the actual products. Writer and social activist Naomi Klein explains that "Nike isn't a running shoe company, it is about the

idea of transcendence through sports, Starbucks isn't a coffee shop chain, it's about the idea of community." [24] Media theorist Douglas Rushkoff states that "[b]rands become more than just a mark of quality, they become an invitation to a longed-for lifestyle, a ready-made identity." [25]

RELATIONSHIPS WITH SOCIAL MEDIA AND USER-GENERATED CONTENT

There are four primary relationships that a person can have with media: as a tool-builder, content-creator, content-distributor, or audience member. Before a medium can be used as a system of communication, its technologies must be constructed and made available to the creators, distributors, and audiences of content. Examples of tool-builders include the industrial designers, electrical engineers, and computer programmers who design and manufacture the technologies that enable the creation or experience of digital media content. Content-creators are the producers, directors, designers, and musicians who use these tools to create content, and they are typically more involved with the social or economic functions of media than with its technologies. Content-distributors are involved with the delivery of content to audiences using distribution-tools. Examples of content-distributors include Web hosting companies, commercial radio stations, film distributors, and film theaters. The most common relationship people have with media is as audience members, who experience content through some form of distribution technology. Audiences are critical to the existence of media because they provide the means of commodifying content that enables the existence of content creators and distributers. Audiences provide media purveyors with direct income by purchasing media content or distribution services, and they provide them with indirect income by purchasing products that are advertised within media.

User-generated content is an important feature of social media, distinguishing it from other forms of mass media that use content created by professionals employed as writers, actors, musicians, camerapersons, directors, or editors. When user-generated content is distributed through mass media, the public becomes both audience and creator by providing their acting, opinions, photographs, videos, audio recordings, or writings. This method of media production is related to Alvin Toffler's idea of 'prosumers,' which he defines as consumers who contribute to the production of the commodities they consume. [26] An early form of mass media that was created by the public is the graffiti scrawled by construction workers onto the ancient pyramids at Giza, [27] but the obvious lineage of social media is the 'letter to the editor' format that has existed for centuries within newspapers and magazines. When published, these letters enable anyone to express their opinions to a potentially large readership. [28] Other formats of user-generated content that have evolved over the past 80 years within radio and television media include game shows, phone-in talk shows, reality television, hidden-camera reality television, talent competitions, and news programs. [29] A feature of user-generated content that is becoming increasingly popular is the incorporation of verbal abuse, ridicule, and humiliation directed at public participants – especially within phone-in talk shows. [30]

The distribution of user-generated content provides significant advantages to media producers, distributors, and audiences. The production of professional quality media – especially television programs and narrative films – can involve enormous expenditure, including the costs of writers, talent, production crews, directors, sets, and equipment. These costs are significantly reduced when user-generated content is incorporated into mass media because the public provides documentation of themselves as content, usually without cost to distributors and often using their own

recording equipment. But the most valuable advantage of user-generated content for distributors is an audience's inherent attraction to content that features the public themselves.

Anyone with voyeuristic desires will likely be attracted to the enormity of personal photos and videos that are easily obtained through social media; and people with even mild feelings of narcissism or exhibitionism will probably be captivated by a distribution system that permits broadcasting documentation of themselves to large audiences. Erich Fromm observed that the general public is "so selfishly concerned with their private affairs that they pay little attention to all that transcends the personal realm." [31] A recent empirical study by Keith Wilcox and Andrew T. Stephen found that users of social media could increase their feelings of self-esteem by presenting positive images of themselves through social media. [32] Audiences may be attracted to social media for various egoistic reasons, but this attraction becomes transformed into an economic structure that enables the existence and popularity of social media.

COMMODIFICATION OF SOCIAL MEDIA

Entities that produce or distribute media content need revenue for survival, whether it is an independent filmmaker who creates documentaries on poverty or a media conglomerate that produces commercial films, television programs, and newspapers. Media entities can survive through personal funds, public funding or private endowments, but most rely on the sale of a product, like any other commercial business. In his book *The Political Economy of Communication,* Vincent Mosco describes commodification as "the process of transforming things valued for their use into marketable products that are valued for what they can bring in exchange." [33] The strategy to commodify a

pair of shoes may be obvious, but the transformation of media into a marketable product may be less apparent because the content of mass media is not always its product. Noam Chomsky explains this approach to the commodification of media in the "propaganda model" that is described in many of his books, including *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media, which he* co-authored with Edward S. Herman. [34]

A core idea in their propaganda model is that the audiences of mass media are the product being sold, and the buyers of this product are the corporations whose goods are being advertised through mass media. [35] A television program becomes a marketable product, for example, through its ability to attract the type of audience that is desired by advertisers. Chomsky describes:

> the case of public TV station WNET, which 'lost its corporate underwriting from Gulf+Western as a result of a documentary called 'Hunger for Profit,' about multinationals buying up huge tracts of land in the third world.' These actions 'had not been those of a friend,' Gulf's chief executive wrote to the station, adding that the documentary was 'virulently anti-business, if not anti-American.' [36]

The propaganda model considers the primary functions of mass media to include the accommodation of advertising, attraction of audiences to advertising, and the promotion of values through news media that support the corporations who pay for the advertisements. When Chomsky was asked during a public lecture if his analysis is 'a conspiracy theory,' he replied:

> Look, part of the structure of corporate capitalism is that the players in the game try to increase profits and market shares – if they don't do that, they will no longer be players in the game. Any

> economist knows this: it's not a conspiracy theory to point that out, it's just taken for granted as an institutional fact..Well, what we've been discussing are simply the institutional factors that set the boundaries for reporting and interpretation in the ideological institutions. That's the opposite of conspiracy theory, it's just normal institutional analysis, the kind of analysis you do automatically when you're trying to understand how the world works. For people to call it a "conspiracy theory" is part of the effort to prevent an understanding of how the world works.. [37]

A common characteristic of most social media is that users are provided services without cost, yet Facebook, Twitter and YouTube – the preeminent social media providers – are each valued at more than $10 billion USD. The commodification of media within these companies is not obtained by selling media content; the photos, opinions, and videos they distribute are given freely to users. Table 1 lists the social networking sites with the highest amount of web traffic, and this list also includes the top four websites of any type. The primary source of revenue for 29 of the 31 sites is through advertisements that are embedded within their content. The two sites in the list that do not rely on this form of commodification are soundcloud.com [38] and meetup.com; [39] their incomes are obtained through marketing services that are provided to their paying customers. [40]

Website	Rank	Country	Comment
google.com	1	USA	market capitalization: $248 billion USD
facebook.com	2	USA	market capitalization: $26.97 billion USD
youtube.com	3	USA	subsidiary of Google
yahoo.com	4	USA	market capitalization: $22.71 billion USD
twitter.com	8	USA	market capitalization: $10 billion USD
linkedin.com	13	USA	market capitalization: $11.72 billion USD
vk.com	28	Russia	
weibo.com	32	China	
pinterest.com	38	USA	
flickr.com	60	USA	
livejournal.com	120	Russia	
douban.com	122	China	
renren.com	128	China	
deviantart.com	138	USA	
stumbleupon.com	156	USA	
soundcloud.com	198	Germany	
myspace.com	205	USA	
taringa.net	252	Argentina	
xing.com	275	German	
kaixin001.com	276	China	
mixi.jp	359	Japan	
ning.com	457	USA	
meetup.com	465	USA	
viadeo.com	504	France	
delicious.com	532	USA	
hi5.com	648	USA	
netlog.com	704	Belgium	
orkut.com	727	USA	owned by Google
cloob.com	836	Iran	
skyrock.com	851	France	
last.fm	934	UK	

Table 1. Ranking of most popular social networking sites according to network traffic, including four most popular websites of any type. [41] [42]

THE JUGGERNAUTS OF SOCIAL MEDIA

Google's primary Internet service is a search engine, but they are directly involved in social media through youtube.com, plus.google.com and orkut.com, social media sites owned by Google. Google.com has the most web traffic in the world, and the company's market capitalization at the time of this writing is $248 billion USD. [43] Ninety-five percent of Google's revenue is obtained through 'Adwords,' a contextual advertising service that is sold to Google's clients. [44] Google's revenue from advertising was $46 billion USD for 2012, and its profit was 10.7 billion USD. [45] Google distributes targeted advertisements for its clients within web search results and on partner websites that participate in its 'Adsense' program. [46] Clients are charged according to the number of customers who have clicked on their ads or, for a smaller fee, the number of times an ad is displayed to customers – known as 'impressions.' Partner sites that host Google's ads receive a portion of the advertising revenue obtained through

Adsense. The largest partner site of Google's AdSense program is YouTube, the video-sharing site that has been owned by Google since 2006. A YouTube marketing document states:

> 9 out of 10 viewers can be enticed to watch video ads. Just write your ad, set your budget, and choose targeting options, like interests and ages, that speak to your audience. AdWords for video takes care of the rest, automatically positioning your video in front of the people who are reading, searching for, and watching online content related to your business. [47]

Twitter is a social networking site that describes itself as "an information network that brings people closer to what's important to them." [48] The website currently supports 140 million users and 340 million messages – known as 'tweets' – per day. Twitter is a

private company that is not yet traded on any stock market, but its current market value is estimated to be $10 billion USD. [49] Twitter's revenue is obtained through on-page advertising and 'promoted tweets' that are distributed through various websites as 'now trending.' Twitter states on their site that users can "Use Promoted Tweets to amplify your message with targeting options on Twitter.com and across mobile devices to reach the right person, in the right place, at the right time." [50] Many entertainers use Twitter to promote themselves, and the Twitter users that currently have the most followers are singers Lady Gaga, Justin Bieber, Katy Perry, and Rihanna. [51] Bieber's Twitter account, YouTube channel, and Facebook page all contain advertisements for his music, listings of tour dates, or links for purchasing his music online.

Facebook's revenue is currently derived from advertisements placed on the right-hand side of users' pages, or from 'sponsored stories,' which are "messages coming from friends about them engaging with your Page, app or event that a business, organization or individual has paid to highlight so there's a better chance people see them." [52] Clients who use Facebook's advertising services are charged according to the number of users who click on their advertisements or by the number of advertisements that are simply displayed to users. Facebook's method for targeting advertisements to users is different from Google's strategy because Facebook uses personal demographics. Google places advertisements that correspond with the words entered into its search engine, or according to the words appearing in the content of partner websites. Facebook can offer its clients unprecedented audience size, which is currently 1 billion, and extensive personal information on its users. [53] Facebook's clients can designate a target audience according to various demographics, including city, country, gender, age, marital status, language, likes, interests, operating system, ethnicity,

connections to specific Facebook pages, events or apps, friends of targeted audiences, relationship status, interest in men or women, education level, college attended, field of study, and employer. Friends of targeted audiences can also be designated as targets for advertisements. [54]

These details illustrate that YouTube, Twitter, and Facebook are commodifying social media through the placement of embedded advertising within user-generated content, and that this strategy is providing them with significant revenue. Using the perspective of Chomsky and Herman's propaganda model, social media content is being used to attract users so they can be sold to advertising clients.

CONTENT OSMOSIS AND THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF SOCIAL MEDIA

The perspective for analyzing social media within this paper is derived from 'political economy,' which Vincent Mosco describes as "the study of the social relations, particularly the power relations, that mutually constitute the production, distribution, and consumption of resources, including communication resources." [55] Some proponents who witnessed the birth of the Web proclaimed this new resource would finally enable anyone to become a producer of content, and conglomerates would no longer dominate the production and distribution of media. [56] More recently, advocates of social media have expressed a similar enthusiasm because even people lacking technical abilities can easily share their opinions using worldwide distribution structures, such as Facebook, YouTube, or Twitter.

Having meaningful social interactions, being part of a community, and receiving social recognition are important contributors to our emotional well-being, [57]

but the pursuit of these needs through conventional methods provides few of us with the social recognition we may desire or feel we deserve. Most people probably discover that "Life isn't always what one likes." [58] In a world of mass media dominated by nobility, politicians, celebrity actors, musicians and athletes, the opportunity to display oneself to the world through social media is an appealing feature for anyone seeking recognition from friends, family, or the public. Social networking sites are now contributing to the social needs of over 50% of adults in USA, Britain and Russia, and this figure is over 90% for users 18-29 years old in USA, Italy, Britain, and Spain. [59] [60] Achieving public recognition is undoubtedly difficult for anyone seeking it through conventional means, but social media has facilitated real fame for a few people, as singer Justine Bieber did with YouTube [61] or writer Kelly Oxford with Twitter. [62] A unique feature of social media relative to other mass media is its supposed capacity for promotion and empowerment of the masses.

We can be empowered through social media in the same manner that we are motivated by the personas within a narrative. [63] Our identification with the characters in a film is often explained in film theory using Jacques Lacan's notion of the "mirror stage." [64] Lacan proposed that an infant first acquires a mental representation of the self by identifying with a reflection of their body in a mirror, and that an infant's ego is then formed through this objectification. Film theorist Christian Metz applied Lacan's ideas to cinema by proposing that audiences are attracted to characters in a film that depict desirable personas for objectifying the self. [65] A common persona within narrative film is the underdog who is repeatedly maltreated or denied opportunity, but who eventually becomes a hero by overcoming incredible obstacles. Filmgoers who feel disadvantaged in their actual lives may identify with the underdog narrative and consequently feel empow-

ered by the notion that they also possess the heroic qualities of the underdog persona.

For most people, identification with the characters in a narrative film is likely to cease at the completion of the narrative, or by becoming cognizant that the personas are merely actors. Social media, like film, provide audiences with personas for identification, but these personas are different from those in film because the characters within social media are also its audience. This feature of social media – its user-generated content – enables an effective mechanism for broadcasting a desirable image of the self. Facebook users, for example, can post photos of themselves being more sociable, more beautiful, more intelligent, or more accomplished than the real self. During interviews with Facebook users, psychologist Sherry Turkle was told by a participant "not to be fooled by anyone you interview who tells you that his Facebook page is 'the real me.' It's like being in a play. You make a character." [66] Narrative film and social media both attract audiences through depictions of desirable personas, but their methods for obtaining revenue through this attraction are different. Revenue from narrative film is typically attained through ticket sales to audiences, but revenue from social media is usually obtained through advertisements that are funded by clients. By enabling its users to feel that they can obtain desirable personas through participation in social media, content osmosis becomes a mechanism for attracting users so they can be directed to embedded advertising.

Another feature of social media that some people find appealing is the ability to communicate with friends or strangers while avoiding face-to-face or real-time interactions. Turkle discusses this quality extensively in her book *Alone Together,* and she quotes an interviewee who said "After work – I want to go home, look at some photos from the grandchildren on Facebook, send some e-mails and feel in touch. I'm tired. I'm not

ready for people – I mean people in person." [67] Many of the younger participants interviewed by Turkle were uncomfortable engaging in face-to-face or telephone communication, stating they lacked the conversational abilities. "All the Richelieu sophomores agree that the thing to avoid is the telephone. Mandy [a student interviewee] presents a downbeat account of a telephone call: 'You wouldn't want to call because then you would have to get into a conversation.'" [68] An extreme example of this avoidance was an emergency situation in Australia where two young girls fell unnoticed into the public sewer system on a street. Instead of using their smart phone to call an emergency number, they used it to post their status on Facebook. [69] Turkle describes how some people prefer social media and text messages because they can edit a communication before sending it, giving them opportunities to create ideal images of themselves. "The advantage of screen communication is that it is a place to reflect, retype, and edit. 'It is a place to hide,'" says one of Turkle's interviewees. [70] Another interviewee states: "If Facebook were deleted, I'd be deleted.... All my memories would probably go along with it...I might actually freak out." [71]

This article has discussed how social media can empower its users by enabling them to construct idealized depictions of themselves; and most users pursue this by posting appealing content of themselves. The mechanism of content osmosis used in this process, however, can also be used with reprehensible content. On the darker side of using media to obtain feelings of empowerment are fictitious or actual depictions of human ridicule, humiliation, vengeance, and death. Witnessing or distributing this form of content provides some people with feelings of pleasure that are known as 'Schadenfreude.' [72] John Portman presents an extensive discussion and social justification of Schadenfreude in his book *When Bad Things Happen*

to Other People, and he uses the writings of moral philosophers to explain how we are empowered by depictions of human tragedy because they provide evidence of ourselves being superior or, at least, more fortunate than the victims of tragic circumstances. Portman writes, "Nietzsche believes that we have been socially conditioned to view the setbacks of other persons in terms of our own well-being. Ever worried that people around us may be flourishing more than we are, we view their suffering as a chance to even the score, as it were. In Nietzsche's genealogy of Schadenfreude, our pleasure comes not just from the actual suffering of others but also from the fact that they suffer." [73]

Using human suffering as entertainment has existed since antiquity. Ancient Rome entertained its citizens with actual death within gladiatorial events, while today's audiences are presented with fictional and real human tragedies within various forms of media, including narrative film, computer games, news media, and social media. The poet Byron coined the phrase "Roman holiday" in reference to an "occasion on which enjoyment or profit is derived from others' suffering or discomfort" – a historical reference to Rome's presentation of gladiator events on civic holidays. [74] The human desire for Schadenfreude is provided in social media through confessional websites, which provide online media spaces where users can discuss their participation in self-mutilation, rape, incest, murder, or any other sins and taboo topics they wish to share. [75] [76] A related format is the 'revenge website,' where users attempt to damage the reputations of ex-lovers or ex-friends by posting provocative documentation. The most notorious revenge site is considered to be *Is Anyone Up?* [77] This site allowed users to post anonymous submissions of nude photographs or streaming media of anyone – accompanied by a victim's "Facebook or Twitter accounts, with their full names, cities, and states blasted in Google searchable headlines." [78]

The juggernaut YouTube is also a distributor of unscrupulous content. YouTube is a social medium because users create most of its video content, but the user comments that accompany the videos are its most populous form of user-generated content. This feature permits users to express supportive or disparaging comments about posted videos, about posters of the videos, about other users, or about any other topic desired. Many YouTube users present themselves within comments as being more knowledgeable, more just, or more apathetic than other users. Disparaging comments are especially common for videos that have gone viral. Amanda Todd was a Canadian teen who posted a video on YouTube in 2012 in which she describes her tragic story of being bullied online. [79] The video received significant international attention after she committed suicide one month later. Online comments accompanying her video within YouTube include, "you did it to yourself dumb bitch;" "Fuck you hawksargent [another user's ID] hope you die in HELL;" and "...if I find the guy I will kill him for what he have [sic] done!" [80] Public expressions of apathy and aggression towards suicide victims are probably taboo for most people, but it is apparently acceptable for some users of social media. In his book on Schadenfreude, John Portman discusses psychologist Melvin Lerner's extensive research on justice, which found that most people believe victims of tragedy are deserving of their circumstances because they believe the world is just. Portman writes:

People who fear the vagaries of life or sudden reversals of good fortune may rely unduly upon a belief in the invisible hand of justice. When such people come across examples of suffering, they tell themselves that the suffering has happened to a person who somehow deserved it... When others rationalize our suffering, persuading themselves that we deserve to suffer when they do not really believe we do, cruelty raises its head. The familiar

moral objections to cruelty apply to rationalizing the undeserved suffering of others. [81]

Using Portman's perspective, the numerous YouTube viewers who wrote disparaging comments about Amanda Todd will feel empowered because of Schadenfreude, and they will also feel justified in expressing their viewpoints if they believe the world is just.

Social media incorporate various mechanisms that enable users to feel empowered through content osmosis – including Schadenfreude, the ability to avoid face-to-face communication, and the freedom to post disparaging opinions – but these features are also essential parts of social media's economic strategy. Most social media rely on embedded advertising as the primary source of revenue, similar to commercial television, radio, newspapers, and magazines. And like these established media, the quantity of advertising revenue obtained will correspond with the number of people attracted to the content, even when this content is given freely to its audience. The purveyors of social media have apparently learned that any form of content that attracts more users will lead to increased revenue, even when this content is reprehensible.

CONCLUSION

Social media provides a technical mechanism that distributes mediated symbols of ourselves – our photos, videos, and comments – to an audience that we hope is watching, providing the world of mass media with evidence of our existence and fame. For many people, social media blurs the difference between their reality and dreams by making them feel that their voice is important, that people are listening, and that they exist in the real world as they exist in media. Decades before the popularity of social media, Jean Baudrillard

proposed that we have become so occupied with simulacra – depictions of our world through media – that we have lost contact with the real. [32] He states that we are now "substituting the signs of the real for the real," and the world we once thought as real is now irrelevant. [33]

Media have been used for millennia to depict imaginary experiences, but media content has only recently become an essential part of our personal identities. Some people are now using social media to fulfill their emotional needs [34] in the same manner that consumer products can provide feelings of affluence. [35] Sherry Turkle found "people describing Facebook as better than anything they have ever known." [36] As the perceptual quality of digital media moves closer to being indistinguishable from reality with the uptake of ultra high definition, [37] it is likely that people will become even more dependent on media for creating their desired personas. But regardless of the specific technology being employed, content osmosis is the mechanism within media that feeds our illusion of being, making us feel that we are more than we are.

The most peculiar characteristic of content osmosis is that its effects do not actually exist – content osmosis only provides an illusion of our social needs being fulfilled through media. We do not really inherit the characteristics of the media we experience, we do not become a cowboy by smoking Marlboros, we do not transcend by wearing Nikes, and we do not become affluent by purchasing a luxury car with borrowing money. Naomi Klein states in an interview:

> When you listen to brand managers talk, you can get quite carried away in this idea that they actually are fulfilling these needs that we have for community and narrative and transcendence. But in the end, it is, you know, a laptop and a pair of

> running shoes. And they might be great, but they're not actually going to fulfill those needs. [88]

Turkle presents a related perspective in Alone Together, proposing that our increased dependence on new communication technologies has limited our ability and interest in face-to-face communication, and this dependency is significantly reducing the quality of our personal lives. She states, "[O]n social-networking sites such as Facebook, we think we will be presenting ourselves, but our profile ends up as somebody else – often the fantasy of who we want to be." [89] She adds that digital media has become a "place for hope" for many people, but "what if one of the things technology wants is to exploit our disappointments and emotional vulnerabilities?" [90]

The focus of this paper is not to discuss what technology wants, but to describe what is wanted by the purveyors of social media and their strategies for obtaining it. Most social media appear to be free services, but users are paying through the use of subterfuges. [91] Content osmosis is the mechanism within social media that provides users with the symbols of being moral or immoral persons, but participation in social media usually involves users being exposed to embedded advertisements regardless of the type of social image they pursue. Edward Bernays was perhaps the first person to blur the lines between advertising and media content when he wrote in 1928 that "[t]here is no means of human communication which may not also be a means of deliberate propaganda, because propaganda is simply the establishing of reciprocal understanding between an individual and a group." [92] More recently, communication theorist W. James Potter described the goals of mass media:

> In a mass medium, the sender's main intention is to condition audiences into a ritualistic mode of exposure; that is, senders are much less interested

> in coaxing people into one exposure than they are in trying to get people into a position where they will regularly be exposed to their messages. Senders attempt this conditioning by making the exposures efficient to the audience. Efficiency is achieved when the messages require as little cost to the audience as possible while delivering maximum payoffs. The greater the message efficiency, the greater the audience size. As the mass media increase the size of their audience, their revenues also grow. [93]

We are attracted to social media through the mechanism of content osmosis, believing that participation will fulfill our social needs. Social media are effective mechanisms for containing advertising because we are attracted repeatedly and for long durations; the more time we spend within social media environments, the more likely we will be influenced by their embedded advertisements. Social media have become a unique and powerful marketing tool because advertisers know the demographics of users who receive their ads, making their attempts at persuasion more efficient, effective, and profitable.

The evolution of digital media and the Internet has provided powerful technologies that are capable of a creating a seemingly infinite variety of content, but the major purveyors of these new media are essentially advertising companies. Because their success is determined by the size of their audiences, the content they broadcast is valued according to its capacity to attract audiences. Disturbing videos on YouTube become effective advertising mechanisms by attracting large audiences, such as the video *Saddam Hussein Execution* that was uploaded in 2006 and viewed 12.7 million times since then. During my viewing of this video in South Korea, the embedded advertisement was for *CJmall,* a beauty salon offering women a 3-5% discount on hairstyling and a free makeup service. An-

other ad adjacent to the video announced the opening of a new online clothing store called *8 Seconds,* accompanied by a photo of attractive young people in fashionable, military-style clothing. The embedded advertisements within specific YouTube videos will vary according to a viewer's geographical location. [94]

Another example of disturbing content within social media is the video *911'Die Die' As Mother Stabs Toddler,* which has been viewed 2 million times since it was uploaded to YouTube in 2009. The video contains a recording of a 911 emergency call made by a security guard who is asking for help because a mother is stabbing her 2-year-old child in a laundry room, which can be heard in the background. When this video was viewed in Germany, Google's AdSense program added advertisements for a wellness-health center that provides facials, yoga, healthy drinks, and massage services. Adjacent to the video was an advertisement for a multi-user online game, called *DDTank,* in which players receive points for killing other online players within the game. [95]

YouTube contains thousands of videos depicting fictitious or real murder, executions, rape, abuse and more – even though YouTube's user guidelines state the following:

> Graphic or gratuitous violence is not allowed. If your video shows someone getting hurt, attacked, or humiliated, don't post it. YouTube is not a shock site. Don't post gross-out videos of accidents, dead bodies and similar things. [96]

Contrary to the above guidelines, I propose that YouTube is tolerating videos that contain forbidden subject matter because they are effective mechanisms for attracting audiences to advertising, especially for viewers interested in Schadenfreude. Chomsky and Herman describe "advertising as the primary income

source of the mass media," and that mass media's content is selected according to its capacity to attract the specific audiences that are wanted by advertisers. [97] The type of audience that is desired by any distributor of mass media is one that is large in number; and when this becomes the primary criterion of success, even the dissemination of unethical content becomes permissible if it attracts a large viewership.

YouTube videos are commonly discussed according to the number of times they have been viewed, a statistic that is prominently displayed beneath every video they distribute. This number is essentially a proclamation of a video's advertising power. When social media is viewed as a container for embedded advertising, the specific content being disseminated becomes less important for distributors than its ability to attract a large audience. But a distributor is likely to encounter a dilemma if it uses reprehensible content to increase viewership and advertising revenue. YouTube's apparent solution to this predicament is to publicly state in its guidelines that it "is not a shock site," but then quietly tolerate posted videos or user comments that contain this form of content.

Hunter Moore, the owner of revenge site *Is Anyone Up,* was interviewed by the *Village Voice* and asked how he would respond if photos posted on his site provoked a suicide. He replied:

> If somebody killed themselves over that? Do you know how much money I'd make? At the end of the day, I do not want anybody to hurt themselves. But if they do? Thank you for the money. [98]

Forbes magazine stated that "Moore is as willing to shed pretense and expose his capitalistic motives as the subjects on his site are willing to shed their clothes and expose their bodies." [99]

Through social media we are persuaded to believe that our need for recognition is fulfilled through depictions of ourselves being superior to the masses, or at least more fortunate than victims of tragedy. The function of content osmosis within social media is to direct us to embedded advertisements, which then attempt to persuade us to consume the advertised products. The various technologies that make up social media undoubtedly have tremendous potential in providing real benefits to people's social lives, but pursuit of that goal is being overpowered by the colossal amount of content that is predominantly used to attract users of social media to advertisements.

The advertising world has evolved significantly since Bernays wrote *Propaganda* in 1929, but the underlying method has remained the same. The most common strategy for marketing consumer goods is to embed advertisements within forms of mass media content that are of interest to audiences. The major purveyors of social media are essentially advertising distributors who are in the business of manufacturing audiences and selling them to clients. Audiences are produced – or attracted – using content osmosis, the mechanism within various forms of media that harvests people's attention by supplying them with symbols of their empowerment and the illusion of being more than they are. ∎

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