TOWARDS A THEORY OF HYPERHISTORY

From the Here and Now to the Everywhere and Forever

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Writer and historian Benedict Anderson thought of the nation state as an "imagined political community…*imagined* because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion."[1] This communion requires glue to operate; a material that imparts to individuals the idea of themselves as units in a larger whole. Newspapers are one example of such nation-binding material, wherein "[t]he idea of a sociological organism moving calendrically through homogeneous, empty time is a precise analogue of the idea of the nation, which also is conceived as a solid community moving steadily down (or up) history."[2] Now, with the onset of digital dissemination of data and stories across both space and time, we emerge into a popular construction of temporal experience that is complex and continuously shifting. The question arises: How can a community that was previously defined by its shared receipt of a constructed national identity, disseminated via authored materials such as newspapers and, more recently, national news outlets, find its sustainable center amid this new cacophony of voices?

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YouTube is exemplary of this massive gesture of accumulation, especially as the tools of video recording and uploading become cheaper and more widespread throughout diverse nations. Their statistics sheet claims that 72 hours of video are uploaded every minute.[3] Without a structure of regulation, chaos would render this tidal wave tough to navigate. Who decides how YouTube people read and sift through YouTube videos?

In broadcast media, editorial control is concentrated among editors, producers, and stakeholders, a power balance already widely explored by a number of thinkers. These authorities use popular stories to create a narrative arc, embedded with ideology and the concerns of capital, and then distribute them through products like periodicals and broadcast news. These distributed materials, and their construction of cohesive audiences, carry with them social conceptions of nation state, citizen, and identity. Online, however, the process of editorial influence and audience is decentralized and dispersed back to the community of users. News media is a primary example of such a shift. The speed, low cost, and distributed global access of decentralized authorship carry traction in the space of web distribution, more influential even than established media's attribute of weighty authority. Independent blogs can deliver coverage faster and closer to the origin event than traditional voices.

In spaces such as YouTube, where there are so many authors, it's necessary for the community to participate actively in the organization of content; otherwise, as noted, the sheer mass of information stored online would be too chaotic to sustain itself. In 1986, as the personal computer began to gain a foothold in the homes of everyday Americans, media theorist Friedrich Kittler wrote, "[s]oon people will be connected to a communication channel which can be used for any kind of media … the memory capacity of the computers will soon coincide with the war itself [when] gigabyte upon gigabyte shall exceed all the processing capacity of historians."[4]

This dispersed structuring of meaning can be understood as a new type of writing, with the collective video data of millions acting as the ink in an emerging form of historical narrative. This nascent narrative practice, an

entirely new Now made possible through billions of individual view counts, opens the doorway for innovative shapes of history to be drawn. As German Utopian philosopher Ernst Bloch wrote, "[n]ot all people exist in the same *Now* … [history is] a polyrhythmic and multi-spatial entity."5 This new Now has the potential to resist ideology and capital, where navigability is drawn not in the space between memory and history, but between memory and memory, not by an oligarchy of authority, but by the users themselves. This new *hyperhistory* creates a new system with the potential for emergent self-regulation.

The lines of historical narrative, i.e., the way that history is made into a mode of storytelling, have traditionally followed a predictable path (notwithstanding the representation of conflicting or "alternative" histories, which via their very definition as "alternative", serve as testimony to the hegemony of dominant narratives). These stories are expressed through the shared material of communication that binds a group—in this case, a group of citizens, i.e., a nation. In the context of distributed digital authorship, we now have a multitude of voices, all singing out, and all recording and distributing their memories at once. Organization of all this information becomes paramount to the social makeup of community, and has been the topic of wide debate across a number of academic disciplines. As technology writer and NYU professor Clay Shirky put it in his book *Here Comes Everybody*, the sheer mass of material creates a mass of data beyond the filtering abilities of traditional authority figures: "the brute economic logic of allowing anyone to create anything and make it available to anyone creates such a staggering volume of new material, every day, that no group of professionals will be adequate to filter the material."6 Without a voice of authority to filter the of

material of memory into a "knowable" order reflective logic, a vehicle of shared cultural identity, then to whom does the task of organization fall? The answer, perhaps not surprisingly, lies in the very same makers who've created the cacophony of perspectives in the first place: the users.

> *Without a voice of authority to filter the material of memory into a vehicle of shared cultural identity, then to whom does the task of organization fall? The users.*

On YouTube, user behavior and interface interaction (specifically, the act of selecting a video from a list of search results) plays a large part in crafting how content is represented and accessed in subsequent searches by other users with similar queries. This is a key phase in designating meaning in a set of data from the ground up as a community, and in transmitting that meaning to the communities of tomorrow. In his book *The Future of the Internet and How to Stop It*, Harvard professor of law and computer science Jon Zittrain describes with great verve the system of self-appointed regulation that has allowed such perilously decentralized projects as Wikipedia to grow and thrive, which he terms "generativity." Individual act of participation—on Wikipedia it's individuals editing, on YouTube it's individuals viewing—contributes to a constantly evolving body of data, creating a space of perpetual authorship. As demonstrated by the concept of emergence, individual actions when viewed at a macroscopic level can reveal patterns of popularity, shifts in attention, and ultimately collective relevance. The participatory actions of today's audience shape what tomorrow's audience sees; tomorrow's history is writ large via the collected gestures of millions today. Simple, individual participatory gestures contribute to articulations of cultural relevance. New hierarchies of

meaning are constantly constructed, broken down, and rebuilt by the audience through this process of authorship-via-systemic participation. This opens the space for a platform of historical narrative bound by a new set of motivations and ideologies. Whether such a development actually takes place, resistant to the corporate and state interests that are bound up in these digital platforms, is yet to be determined. The potential is there. It's possible to propel a video, via the collected efforts of millions of watchers, to the front page of any YouTube search query, choosing by a million strokes those videos that lie at the end of a search for answers in a sea of moving images. One of the earliest examples of disruptive online collective action was a 1998 People magazine "Most Beautiful People" online poll, held six months after the release of *Tiger Beat*-set favorite *Titanic*. The winning "Beautiful Person" was an alcoholic dwarf who appeared regularly on the Howard Stern Show. Hank the Angry Drunken Dwarf received nearly a quarter million online votes. Leonardo DiCaprio? Just over fourteen thousand. 7

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At this point, attention must be given to that fact that YouTube, held by Google, is under the control of a privately owned corporation. It is therefore not a truly "public" space, even though Google itself makes sure to note that "[w]e believe strongly in allowing the democracy of the Web to determine the inclusion and ranking of videos in our search results,"8 though they do not explain precisely how their search engine algorithms actually choose videos for any particular search query (besides their use of view count, they also claim to

include key words and tagging, the age of a video, links from other sites, and number of subscribers to the uploader's channel, among a number of complexly connected parameters). The position of the digital space as a potential public sphere has come under special scrutiny recently as the relationship between corporate owners of these platforms, and the government entities that exploit them as user data farms, have come to light. The awareness of this is due in no small part to Google's own documented history of compliance with NSA requests for data on users.9

In the shifting landscape of authoritarian control over spaces of digital expression, corporate and state interests are becoming increasingly overlapped, as each entity employs the other in a slippery bid to move around boundaries of legislation and permissions. This is especially now, as governments around the world update their laws on, and sometimes actively limit, the freedom of the Internet within their borders. In determining the potential for digital spaces to support resistant forms of self-representation, the consequences for users, information, and their abuse via a coordinated effort between corporate and government actors is no small matter, and in fact magnifies the need for users to be their own advocates in the free and open use of these and other platforms. A key component of such advocacy is the open distribution and free interpretation of memory and history on the part of citizens, both as individuals and as a collective whole. The connective tissue between memory, power, agency, and communication technologies is not a new subject, but it is being played out in real time on the space of the Internet.

French historian Pierre Nora, whose book *Between Memory and History* ruminates on the connection between national identity and collective memory, asserts

that for history to be written, a space between memory and history must exist—a necessary gap from which a singular linear narrative drawn. He describes the difference between memory and history as such:

We should be aware of the difference between true memory … and memory transformed by its passage through history, which is nearly the opposite: voluntary and deliberate, experienced as a duty, no longer spontaneous; psychological, individual, and subjective, but never social, collective, or all encompassing.[10]

The accelerated rate of material accumulation facilitated by digital technologies has collapsed this space. History itself now has the potential to be transformed into something resembling Nora's personification of memory. Personal histories are being constructed in real time as never before. This rate of production is coupled with a vastly dispersed authorship, as many millions of stories are now being concurrently and from a multitude of perspectives (though the distribution of access to digital tools of expression is itself uneven and problematic). On the whole, distributed authorship through emergent self-regulation by users has the potential to shift the way that collective memory, and by extension structures of power and control, are shaped (one cousin of which can be seen in the digital movements enacted against perceived structures of authoritarian control, including DDoS attacks and hacktivists). The archive unmakes traditional modes of history, allowing decentralized participatory significance to develop and paving the way for new models of historiography. This is the redemption inherent in the chaos of *hyperhistory*: frenzied accumulation of meaning, when submitted to a system of self-regulation and democratic classification, allows new histories to emerge. New systems of the social imaginary can be built. Internet users' vastness of number and dispersal is their greatest asset, fostering the

principles of a democratic, self-regulating system. This creates the platform for a set of ethics whose boundaries are defined by something other than geography, ideology, or capital.

Footnotes

1. Benedict Anderson. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. London: Verso, 1983.

2. Ibid.

3. http://www.youtube.com/yt/press/statistics.html

4. Friedrich Kittler. "Gramaphone, Film, Typewriter." Reprinted in Literature, Media, and Information Systems. The Netherlands: G + B Arts International. 1997. 31.

5. Ernst Bloch. *Heritage of Our Times*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1991. 62. Indebted to Joao Ribas' use of this passage in his text, "What To Do With the Contemporary?" *Mousse Magazine #27*. Milano, Italy: *Mousse Magazine and Publishing*. 2010. 89.

6. Clay Shirky. Here Comes Everybody: The Power of Organizing Without Organizations. New York: Penguin, 2008.

7. "Hank the Angry Drunken Dwarf." http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hank_the_Angry_Drunken_Dwarf

8. https://support.google.com/webmasters/answer/66493?hl=en

9. Adam Estes. "Confirmed: NSA Paid Google, Microsoft, Other Millions for PRISM Aid." Posted August 23, 2013. http://gizmodo.com/confirmed-nsa-paid-google-microsoft-others-millions-1188615332

10. Pierre Nora, "Between Memory and History: *Les Lieux de Memoire*" (trans. Marc Roudebush). *Representations* No. 26, Special Issue: Memory and Counter-Memory (Spring, 1989). University of California Press. 7-24, 13.

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