



LEONARDO ELECTRONIC ALMANAC

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EDITORIAL MANAGERS SHEENA CALVERT & ÖZDEN ŞAHİN

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.



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#### LEA PUBLISHING & SUBSCRIPTION INFORMATION

##### Editor in Chief

Lanfranco Aceti [lanfranco.aceti@leoalmanac.org](mailto:lanfranco.aceti@leoalmanac.org)

##### Co-Editor

Özden Şahin [ozden.sahin@leoalmanac.org](mailto:ozden.sahin@leoalmanac.org)

##### Managing Editor

John Francescutti [john.francescutti@leoalmanac.org](mailto:john.francescutti@leoalmanac.org)

##### Art Director

Deniz Cem Önduygu [deniz.onduygu@leoalmanac.org](mailto:deniz.onduygu@leoalmanac.org)

##### Editorial Board

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##### Cover

Deniz Cem Önduygu

##### Editorial Address

Leonardo Electronic Almanac

Sabancı University, Orhanlı – Tuzla, 34956

Istanbul, Turkey

##### Email

[info@leoalmanac.org](mailto:info@leoalmanac.org)

##### Web

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# LEONARDO ELECTRONIC ALMANAC, VOLUME 19 ISSUE 4

# Without Sin: Freedom and Taboo in Digital Media

VOLUME EDITORS

**LANFRANCO ACETI & DONNA LEISHMAN**

EDITORIAL MANAGERS

**SHEENA CALVERT & ÖZDEN ŞAHİN**

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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 pantomime staged for 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, 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.*

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?*

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. The amputation of the hands happened while the state itself was merrily looking somewhere else, too blissfully busy 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 rooted within perceptions 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-cloud will 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 as the 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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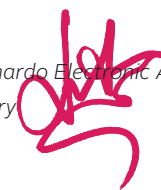
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#### Lanfranco Aceti

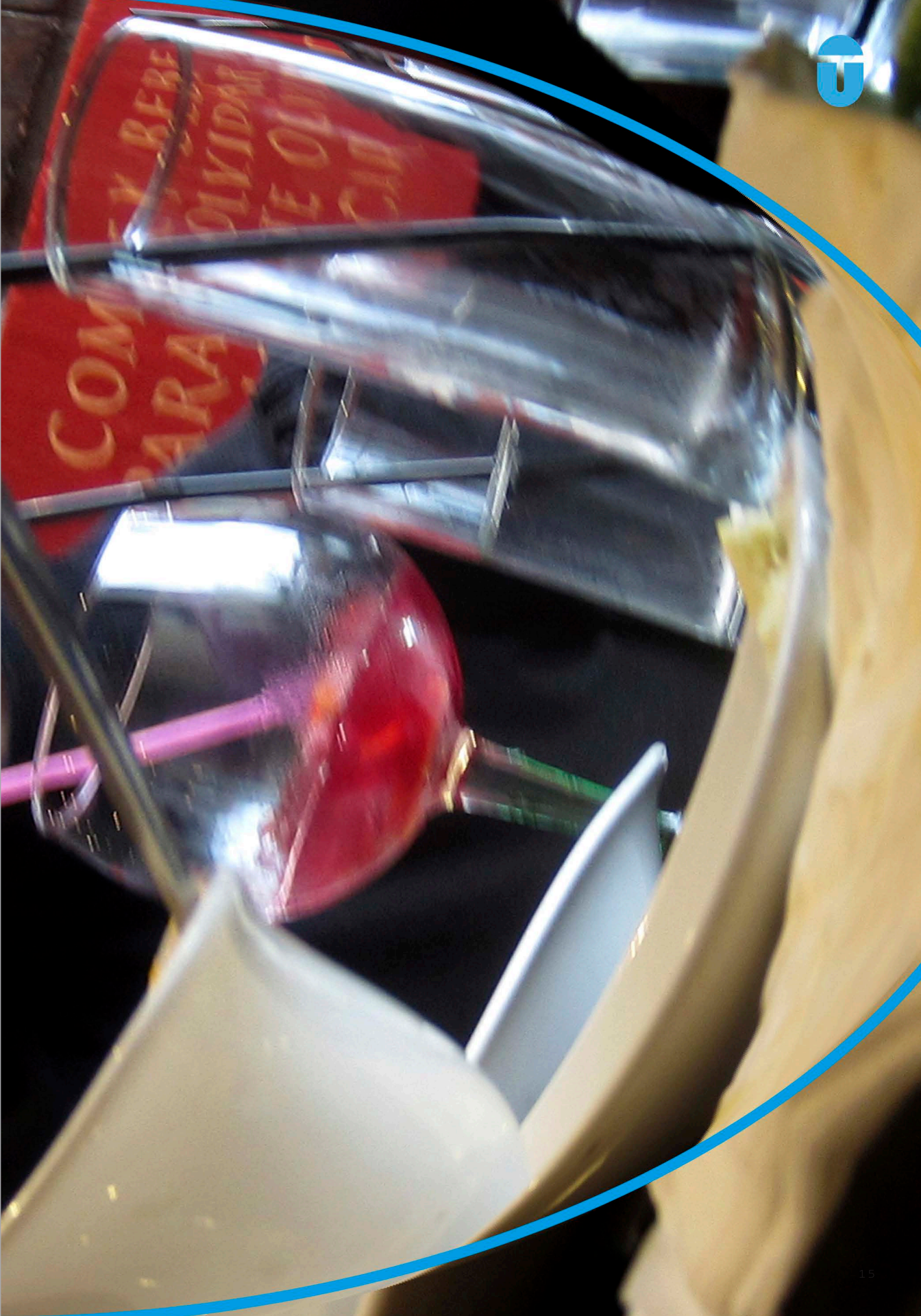
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1. Clive R. Boddy, "The Corporate Psychopaths Theory of the Global Financial Crisis," *Journal of Business Ethics* 102, no. 2 (2011): 255.
  2. Michel Foucault, *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*, trans. Richard Howard (London: Routledge, 2001), 11.
  3. *Ibid.*, 101.



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 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.* <sup>1</sup>

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.* <sup>2</sup>

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” <sup>3</sup> 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*) <sup>4</sup>

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. <sup>5</sup> 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. <sup>6</sup> 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. <sup>7</sup> 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.<sup>7</sup> 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"<sup>8</sup> 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),<sup>9</sup> Guy DeDord's *The Society of the Spectacle* i.e. "All that once was directly lived has become mere representation"<sup>10</sup> and Richard Rorty's *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (published in 1979).<sup>11</sup> 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<sup>12</sup>*

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."<sup>13</sup> 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"<sup>14</sup> 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.<sup>15</sup>*

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."<sup>16</sup> 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<sup>17</sup> 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."<sup>18</sup> 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"<sup>19</sup> whilst Golding in her paper reminds us that Hobbes also asserted that "[f]or seeing life is but a motion of Limbs"<sup>20</sup> 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."<sup>21</sup> 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 *Biopresence* 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'"<sup>22</sup> – 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,"<sup>23</sup> 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? It 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.*<sup>24</sup>

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.

### Donna Leishman

*Duncan of Jordanstone College of Art & Design  
University of Dundee, UK  
d.leishman@dundee.ac.uk  
<http://www.gamhoover.com>*

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# DO WE NEED MORALITY ANYMORE?

by

Mikhail Pushkin

Faculty of Arts and Sciences  
Namik Kemal University  
Pushkin169@gmail.com

## INTRODUCTION

**Plato stated: “A system of morality which is based on relative emotional values is a mere illusion, a thoroughly vulgar conception which has nothing sound in it and nothing true.”** <sup>2</sup> Whereas Mahatma Gandhi offered a different view: “Morality is the basis of things and truth is the substance of all morality.” <sup>3</sup>

In considering the issue of morals, the complex debate on the universal nature of moral values per se has to be forsaken. Traditional moral systems are born from, and bound to a material reality with communities of physical people, whose interaction with each other and the environment are physical and as a result have material, often irreversible tangible consequences. With the emergence of the Internet, society expanded its existence into a new, principally immaterial space. Initially a supplement to our physical interactions, the Internet has gradually become as equally formative (considering the waking time spent in online environments <sup>4</sup>), in a sense overlaying the material one. <sup>5</sup> Increasingly since the 1990s, our younger generations grow up engrossed in this virtual reality, now made mobile and omnipresent with smartphones and tablet PCs. Their system of morals, should we claim it even

## ABSTRACT

*The origins, functions and reasoning behind morality are part of an ongoing debate, stretching through time, societies and disciplines. This paper, however, proposes a more radical stance; suggesting that with the emergence of the Internet and the connectivity that mobile and wireless technologies provide, one is not only forced to redefine, but perhaps abolish the notion of morality altogether.*

*By subverting such basic social and personal categories as identity, community, society, religion, crime and punishment alongside the traditional materiality of human existence, the multiverse that is the Internet takes away not only tools for the enforcement of morality, but also the very need for it given the near absence of measurable ‘good and evil’ behaviors. Both primal in its unrestrained emotional expressivity and highly sophisticated in its technological and social structure the Internet functions by its own flexible set of behavioral prescriptions.*

*I propose a comparative analysis of preexisting moral codes of behavior, illustrating the discrepancies between them and their virtual partners. For instance: access to intimate and or pornographic imagery was once condemned and limited to obscure adult entertainment venues whereas today such content can be accessed via web/mobile cameras and websites in an unlimited and unrestricted manner. Or just as commonly available is today’s- access to videos and manuals on drugs, weaponry and self-harm; areas which were once seen as immoral, illegal, and limited to the domains of criminal and military services and that are now within the reach of every child who has access to the Internet. Such traditionally decried practices as raw pornography, piracy, acts of perversion and images of death are created, shared and practiced without restraint and with public acceptance, leaving popularity with the peers to be the new moderating factor. This helps to establish the ‘morality’ of an emerging generation that is composed of “digital natives and migrants.” <sup>1</sup> The question of whether one should or is even able to influence this process remains open.*

exists, is based on an entirely different reality. As bearers of older morals, we are yet to experience the full extent of the consequences of living in a society with morals which are formed in a reciprocal relationship between online and material realities.

### MORALITY AS CONVENIENT AGENDA

#### In Politics

Political and commercial groups alike utilize censorship and perceived legal boundaries, often 'justified' by a desire to protect 'public' morals, copyright holders, religious and or other minorities, while their real economic and political interests often lie beneath a very thin layer of rhetoric. The argument is commonly formulated on high moral ground, alluding to "fairness," a notion formulated by Tim Stevens.<sup>6</sup> Bill Herman gives us an example of such rhetoric via a recent public statement by Royal Institute of International Affairs head Cary H. Sherman:

*Sherman rails against the anti- SOPA crowd for describing the bills as 'censorship,' which he describes as 'a loaded and inflammatory term.' He says he would rather have 'respectful fact-based conversations' using 'reason, not rhetoric.' Yet in the same essay [...] Sherman repeatedly eschews the more accurate term 'infringement,' choosing the morally loaded (and inaccurate) term 'theft' instead. He compares sites accused of online infringement to 'stores fencing stolen goods.' He accuses SOPA opponents of 'supporting foreign criminals,' 'misinformation,' and 'demagoguery.'*<sup>8</sup>

#### In Academia

Academic circles often surrender to another 'sin' by focusing on propagating their theoretical agenda, striving to represent the Internet society as a kind of illustration to the line of thought they subscribe to.

For example, Sherry Turkle in 1995 argued that "computers embody postmodern theory and bring it down to earth" with "ideas about the instability of meanings and the lack of universal and knowable truths."

<sup>9</sup> While highly influential, and seemingly insightful, Turkle's point is both reductionist towards the Internet and disparaging towards its inherent informative value, sidelining successful projects like Wikipedia, Google search and digitized traditional Encyclopedias, all of which bring a degree of knowledge and 'knowable truths' to the general population now freed from largely abandoned and inconvenient dusty shelves of conventional libraries.

She then proceeds, with virtual reality making "denatured and artificial experiences seem real,"<sup>10</sup> "[the] fake seem more compelling than the real,"<sup>11</sup> and lastly, "so compelling that we believe that within it we've achieved more than we have."<sup>12</sup> Reducing it to "fake/denatured" she does not give virtual reality meaningful status, leaving "more compelling than the real" hanging in the air. Curiously, Frederic Jameson back in 1984 offers a more insightful albeit modernist view when talking about the physicality of objects as a: "a clue or a symptom for some vaster reality which replaces it as its ultimate truth."<sup>13</sup>

The digital divide is temporary, just as the lack of global access to the Internet in poorer countries is an ongoing problem.<sup>14</sup> Even the older generations lacking sufficient computer literacy (not infrequently global policy-makers) is a temporary situation as argued by Jessica Litman<sup>15</sup> and others,<sup>16</sup> and the effect of networked digital reality on humanity as a whole is growing, lasting and redefining. The Internet is bigger than traditional means of regulation and censorship (legal and otherwise) and more influential than any earlier forms of media. However, most importantly it is the environment into which new generations are born natively. Reciprocal relationships of the virtual and 'real,'

with an ever increasing, arguably stronger, role for the digital one, are forcefully redefining human motivations and social practices down to the very core.

One of the ways of renouncing or redefining the contemporary state of morality is in reconstructing it from a blank slate within the present day environment, identifying the elements involved in its creation and maintenance, discovering the reasons for its contemporary existence. One might benefit from constructing the idea of morality by using the Internet's indigenous societies as a starting point, a birthplace, rather than trying to wrap it into an older framework – only to find it lacking. In taking such an approach, one has to consider morality from a pragmatic standpoint, starting with a definition of practical pragmatic rules guiding human behavior.<sup>17</sup>

### Online Forums, Communities, Chats, Notice Boards, MMORPGs

One of the ways of defining the Internet is as a gigantic global information generation, storage and exchange facility, which transcends space and time. Within the Internet sporadic communities are formed around diverse subjects of interest, which can be both related to a person's immediate physical social environment or be conceptually removed from their physical social reality. Online communities often do away with, disregard or make symbolic the essential properties of their 'real world' material counterparts: geographic location, gender, financial status, social strata, age are commonly all assigned by the user without real-world verification and can be rather creative. For example, online multiuser forum Gaia Online or massively-multiplayer online role playing game World of Warcraft are fictional universes inhabited by their users as fictional highly-customizable avatars.

While these characteristics of online participants clearly play a part and with some effort can often be

determined, or are even 'honestly' declared in user profiles, they are secondary to the individuals' manner and ability to communicate. Online characteristics such as gender, age and status can be destroyed and reassembled at will and are artificial by their very nature/context. Society as it manifests on the Internet can therefore be primarily described as communication and virtual interaction based construct, but is quite unlike Marshal McLuhan's "global village,"<sup>18</sup> i.e. where McLuhan imagined humankind making the move from individualism and fragmentation to a collective identity. Users on Internet are defined by their 'voices' and inhabit various 'villages' at a time or the same 'villages' as different personalities – simultaneously. There is no intrinsic motivation to strive for greater or even local good other than egoistic popularity within those interconnected Internet-villages. Popularity, attention, notoriety become the golden coin in their own right, as the traditional capitalist system of financial gratification does not map neatly onto Internet culture (even though virtual fame among other things can be monetized). Popularity can be gained through both negative and positive activity, similar to, and inherited from, the sensationalism of traditional mass-media. 'Trolling' as an Internet specific phenomenon is an example of this changed value system. Trolling illuminates not only reciprocal connections between the shallow sensationalism of mass media and its ruthless insensitivity whilst revealing the sarcasm of some online users. As an act it also reveals deeper motives – suggesting an appetite for a more honest and sincere representation of emotion.<sup>19</sup> One should also consider that the very notion of good or evil is not applicable to online reality and has been supplanted or refocused by aspirations towards fame or infamy. This potentially is an influence reshaping not only individuals but the whole of society, as within only 10 years a third of the world population has become Internet users<sup>20</sup> and there soon will not be any 'offline' population left at all (either directly present on the Internet or under its effect).

Morals generated within such communities are one of the possible starting points for probing present day morality. The existence of persistent virtual identities creates attachment and permits for groupings within diverse communities, resulting in the generation of some alternate forms of 'tribal' and 'territorial' morality.<sup>21</sup> However, these identities exist under an acknowledged absence of authenticity caused by the fact that these identities are created representations of actual users, meaning that they may or may not represent their material creator. Such moralities and allegiances (to ideas or groups) are therefore unstable but not necessarily superficial and fleeting.<sup>22</sup>

Furthermore, communities aligned around different ideas and concepts can exhibit in-group and out-group morality patterns that emulate physical life with its different social groups and strata,<sup>23</sup> a situation that may and at times does foster successful creative collaboration – the Flash community as analyzed by Donna Leishman serving as a vivid example.<sup>24</sup> However, as digital reality is not based on groups of actual individuals, but rather 'voices,' the participants frequently exercise what can be seen as transgressions of traditional morals, while standing behind those fictional identities. The ease of online identity creation also permits movement between different virtual group boundaries. In her article, Liz Gannes goes further and illustrates the impossibility of maintaining a single monolithic identity, highlighting that personal representation always differs in response to the fixed and inherently different resources that the user must use to 'create' their profile.<sup>25</sup>

What can be considered permissible online can result in immoral and or even illegal offline behavior, for instance digital distribution of (underage) explicit imagery of self and others still has direct offline consequences,<sup>26</sup> similarly online facilitated bullying can result in tragic outcomes.<sup>27</sup> Limitations of online

discourse are subjectively determined in online communities through a localized group mentality (which may or may not coincide with traditional systems of moral values). No effective punishment goes beyond the destruction of a fictional identity or rejection by the virtual peers, and in most cases, this can be easily repaired by simply assuming a new identity. This in turn distorts the perception of reality in non-virtual life, in which a person can feel inappropriately distant and buffered from the consequences of their actions.<sup>28</sup> However, this same false impression of safety permits people to act upon their perceptions of right and wrong, more willingly, providing a sense of safety in expressing disagreement with things they find unacceptable, without feeling peer pressure, since within virtual reality, escape is always available.<sup>29</sup>

#### Other Online Content

A different way of calibrating the morality practiced in the real world is seen in the establishment of boundaries of approved or disapproved audiovisual material, discourse and practices. This is perhaps the strongest argument against the applicability of traditional morality to the digital age. Pornography, violent imagery, the faces of the dead, the propaganda of violence indeed most imaginable forms of transgressions are freely available on the Internet. Much of this content is produced in the real world, but emerges out of the underground, borderline illegal or outright illegal communities, which practice both criminal activity and diverse sexual activities. However these communities now have access to a larger (and generally more accepting) online audience. As a result more such content is created in the real world to cater to all fringe and taboo tastes, which can include, for example, child and animal abuse.<sup>30</sup>

At the same time a wide range of video games such as *Manhunt 1&2*, *Postal 2*, and various sex *Sims*<sup>31</sup> enable players to commit virtual crimes, acts of vio-

lence and perversion through their avatars. And while Susan Sontag<sup>32</sup> debates possible moral implications of experiencing and evaluating realistic photographic imagery of suffering, virtual reality in itself possesses no moral angle and offers nothing less than participation. It creates whole photorealistic immersive environments to explore one's every notion (moral or immoral) in space where material life and death are absent, leaving aesthetic judgment to reign supreme over evaluation of virtual pains and pleasures. Although certain behavior patterns are encouraged or discouraged in computer games (potentially providing a perfect educational tool), they are more frequently than not rewarding morally dubious activities. Furthermore, computer games are only a fraction of global networked reality and while it is easy to criticize virtual reality from the traditional moralistic standpoint, the abundance and unquestionable popularity of violent, immoral content serves as a clear marker of the true nature of our current society. One can debate whether this signifies a return to/move towards a cruel society, or is a result of desensitization to violence,<sup>33</sup> or indeed we are finally able to witness humanity's unrestrained desires: its genuine but unpleasant face.

Considering that in a material capitalist world of global consumption whereby the market that is creating the consumer, the digital environment is offering an almost unlimited range of 'products' for free or at prices affordable to a school student (online games or pornography sites for example), enabling the user to choose to direct their interest and involvement without pressure or much financial limitation. One can therefore draw conclusions that the Internet either provides people with an opportunity to condone through participation this absence of morality or it is a scenario that elucidates the inadequacy of the preexisting moral system.

#### WHERE ARE WE HEADING

It should be noted that a frightening excess of immoral behavior, discourses and taboo practices online do not present themselves as a solely negative burden. Susceptibility to traditional propaganda (whether socialist, democratic, or of a purely commercial kind), which is instrumental in our pre-networked society, is innately diminished by the enormous 'relativity' of the digital networked environment. Those born digital are a priori aware that Internet is an artifice, a created reality with all information in it composed and not necessarily based on any external reality (convincing as it may appear). For an idea (or a product) to be accepted, heard and internalized, reliance on authority figure or traditional marketing strategies are not sufficient anymore due to the scrutiny of online crowds which are ever-present and not easily suppressed – although new forms of product and idea marketing have now evolved such as social network marketing and viral marketing models.<sup>34</sup>

The same relativity which is permeating the perception of reality, provides an extra layer of distancing from biased mainstream media;<sup>35</sup> not only do historical facts get discussed with peers from different countries (with different moral and propaganda systems), but also current events are reflected on by bloggers from places where those same events take place, often providing different angles.<sup>36</sup> As a result, a person significantly immersed in digital reality, where everything is constructed, manipulated and recreated, is highly distrustful of 'real' news.

Revisiting and in a way refuting Sherry Turkle's skepticism,<sup>37</sup> this paper argues, that what the Internet generation offers is perhaps a birth of new sincerity, both cruel and fair in the same way that a mirror reflects one's perhaps repulsive appearance without mercy or (moral) beautification of a portraitist. And while a postmodern or nihilistic critic might ascribe apathy to the new crowd, it might well be overlooking the fact



that disinterestedness is aimed at a priori fictional propaganda structures, resulting from a pragmatic lack of desire to be involved in political matters over which a common citizen effectively has no power. At the same time, having access to an environment, where a person can enjoy a much wider freedom of expression, exchange of ideas and information, might in fact result in something akin to Guy Debord's *Society of the Spectacle*,<sup>38</sup> indeed the Internet may be a social space that is proving to be more honest and realistic than postmodern criticism could ever fathom. For while the Internet is indeed a work of fiction, an artificial all-encompassing illusion, filled with images and ideas drawn largely from already corrupted pool of manipulative mass media – it is at the same time a relatively safe, uncensored, and unrestricted environment for communication, where people may, for the first time in history of humanity, enjoy true freedom of expression. For everyone is their own demiurge in this brave new world. ■

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