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New Media, New Publics?

An Introduction to Supplement 15

by Charles Hirschkind, Maria José A. de Abreu, and Carlo Caduff

In this special issue, we examine how publics are brought into being through historically specific media practices. We treat the question of new media as an invitation to explore changing conditions of communication across a number of ethnographic locations. We argue that these changing conditions have challenged our capacity to understand the nature of publics. It is important to emphasize that none of the contributors perceives new media as a coherent object of attention that can easily be isolated as an entity; nor do the contributors locate its novelty in its digital format. Instead, they examine modes of mediation that entail the technological but are not reducible to it. This approach allows anthropologists to keep the referent of new media open and remain attentive to emerging forms of public life that are working outside of or adjacent to the logics of both the digital and the technological. Our hope is that this collection of essays contributes to an anthropological understanding of media that illuminates important aspects of the political economic present, attends to the erosion and reanimation of anonymity in public life, and captures dynamics of staging, projection, and response within and across ethnographic sites.

In the opening scenes of *Fahrenheit 451*, firefighters raid a private home in search of books to burn. They are trainees whose search concentrates on the hiding places favored by those who illegally keep books in the interior of electric devices like lamps or heaters. In a scene of the film, a firefighter takes off the screen of a TV set and finds in its hollow space a stack of books. Instead of drawing our attention to the technological apparatus of the television we are directed to another medium: the book.

Made in 1966, two years after the publication of *Understanding Media*, Truffaut's filmic adaptation of Bradbury's book (Bradbury 1953) visually recasts McLuhan's famous dictum that one medium's content is always another medium (McLuhan 1964). It does so, however, by burrowing out the television medium of its content. Perhaps by remediating into film a book about books, Truffaut really believed that, despite its greater combustibility, film would survive and help preserve the book as an object under threat, not unlike microphotography did in the past to counter the perishability of paper.

What we are told in the film, however, is that the prime reason why books must be burned has to do with the effects they produce on the reading public. "Books disturb people. They make them anti-social," says Montag, the film's main character. The view of the authorities, we learn, is that books unnecessarily deepen and complexify the emotional and intellectual life of their readers, creating an obstacle to the light cheeriness and shallow conversation that make social happiness possible. Moreover, as fire chief Captain Beatty asserts, books are unfit to accommodate the rhythms brought by new media. The new technology in question is interactive television, a device that extends across much of the interior wall space within the home. Instead of the encumbering depths of human experience encountered in the book, television captivates its audience with banal, mind-numbing programs engineered to engender and protect the shallow psychology on which both happiness and social harmony depend.

Surveillance is omnipresent in Truffaut's imagined future. Throughout the entire film, a dim spotlight illuminates the center of the screen, framing the action's capture by media and signaling the presence of an invisible gaze originating at the same location occupied by the film's spectator. Within this panoptic dystopia, speech rarely retains a content beyond its merely phatic function, its telegraphic economy and predictability (its digital simplicity, we might say) mirroring the operations of the technological media that condition and produce it. Truffaut's dystopian view about the forms of interactivity engendered within this techno-mediatic milieu are dramatized in the title sequence scenes where the highly mechanical male voice reciting the credits overlaps with the camera's abrupt zooming in to the TV antennas that sit atop the roofs. Here

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mechanized, authoritarian speech telescopes down its essential aspect, the material conditions of its broadcast, represented in the antennas.

Despite its hierarchical model of communication, the themes and anxieties that traverse *Fahrenheit 451* are strikingly contemporary with our own techno-mediatic moment: the fascination with new forms of interactive media, the threat of displacement of one medium by another, tensions between progress and preservation, the specter of mass surveillance and authoritarian rule lurking behind the seductive surface of new technologies, and the ever-present fear of losing touch with ourselves and others. In light of this continuity of experience across more than five decades, scholars increasingly wonder what is “new” in new media. How can this elusive category be circumscribed? While many scholars have taken up the problem of definition, we believe that the analytical force of the category “new media” lies precisely in its resilience and seduction, less in the answers it may offer than the questions it enables us to pose anew regarding our political economic present.

Under the Spell

Listening to the latest pronouncements of the prophets of technological revolution, it seems that we are on the verge of a new age. The epochal transformation that is presumably unfolding today corresponds with the rise of new media and the connectivity and interactivity it is making possible. The benefits that the technological infrastructure of communication promises to provide us are vast: more equality, freedom and democracy, better education, a radical extension and enrichment of our social relationships, an intensification and proliferation of our pleasures. Today, “hundreds of millions of people are, each minute, creating and consuming an untold amount of digital content” (Schmidt and Cohen 2014:3). The exceptional speed of transmission and the unprecedented scale of circulation are driving “one of the most exciting social, cultural, and political transformations in history” (Schmidt and Cohen 2014:4).

The breathless optimism animating this type of new media discourse can sustain quite contradictory perceptions about the achievements that media portend. What some endorse passionately as an opportunity to empower consumers and bring competition to the market, others promote as a unique possibility to end poverty and reboot democracy. Ruminations about Facebook and Twitter revolutions cast corporate websites as platforms for progressive politics (Gerbaudo 2012:2). It is the almost unlimited faith in the power of modern technology that enables new media discourse to reconcile such diverse views.

At the heart of this discourse is an enduring fascination with technology, envisioned as an autonomous source of social, cultural, and political change. As the primary cipher by which the progressive movement of modernity is measured and celebrated, technology is invested with extraordinary powers to solve the problems that afflict societies (Larkin 2008; Mrázek 2002; Nye 1994). As such, it is made to embody the utopian dreams that undergird the teleology of modernity. This fascination for the

technological occurs in tandem with a radical overvaluation, or misrecognition, of its consequences, evident in an overemphasis on technological solutions, and a concomitant neglect of the political and economic determinants of social problems. Yet, despite, or perhaps because of, its frequent failure to perform the role of magic bullet assigned to it, technology remains a persistent object of investment.

Today, new media bears the promise of universal political enfranchisement in the form of “access,” the term by which projects of democratic inclusion are being reimagined and reengineered (Hansen 2004; Kelty 2017; Logan 2010). Political and economic divides are increasingly recast as digital divides. Humanitarian efforts to diminish the entrenched inequalities between North and South find new optimism in the project of extending the infrastructure of digital technology around the globe. Access to the latest media technologies is assumed to determine whether one is an agent of history or a silent passenger, and thus, whether one is living in the present or the past (Mattelart 2010; Mazzarella 2010a; Strassler 2010).

Sutured to a liberal democratic imaginary, the notion of new media performs an ideological function deeply informed by the concepts of civil society and the public sphere. Indeed, contrasting usage of the closely linked terms “social media” and “new media” parallels distinctions associated with these two concepts. On the one hand, social media, like civil society, articulates a domain of social engagement outside the sphere of state power, a space idealized as a site of human agency and emancipation, grounded in relationships of unfettered, unregulated social and economic exchange. As in the capitalist market from which it derives, value here is understood to be determined on the basis of practices of free exchange. On the other hand, new media gives shape to a public sphere where citizens may encounter one another in abstraction from the conditions of differential wealth and power that divide them, and may, through their discursive interactions within this arena, exercise political agency. New media holds out the promise of a revolution that will allow people to be directly involved in the institutions that shape the conditions of their lives, to realize the potential that old media failed to achieve (Aouragh 2011; Coleman 2010; Gitelman 2006).

Passing beyond equally simplistic condemnations and celebrations in our explorations, we refused the temptation to come up with an answer and assume a stable referent for the entity called “new media.” Instead, we approached the new as a form of expectation oriented toward the future, as an ever-receding horizon of what is to come. We concluded that it is important, both analytically and politically, for any anthropological account to read the “new” in new media not in a sequential sense but in a structural one. The future orientation that is so characteristic for the speculative economy of technological modernity creates the endless frontier that is driving consumer capitalism today. Much like the consuming subject who strains toward, without ever arriving at, a state of full satisfaction, so the lure of the new lies in its constant deferral into the future. The promise of the new, therefore, hinges less

on the possibility of its arrival than, paradoxically, on its capacity to withdraw, less on a stage or point in time than a structural movement that keeps alive the desire for the new itself.

This desire for the new is of course itself highly mediated. The new is grounded in the conditions of the present that assign it such a status (Caduff 2015). This means that the new is not only that which is staged as new but also the very apparatus through which such staging occurs. It is a mode of engagement with time itself through the medium of the new. It suggests a scene of potentiality, a place for projection and response that can extend in multiple directions. For example, when we refer to a particular technology as new, its newness may actually imply different orientations to time. Television (particularly news broadcasting) is a medium that potentializes the present around indeterminate futures (de Abreu 2013; Doanne 1990). This stands in contrast to the *noeme* that Roland Barthes associated with photography's temporal quality of pastness, or film with its forward motion (Barthes 1981). Thus, the question of the new is not simply a historical one (When was a technology new?) (Benjamin 1969). The question of the new is a question about forms of mediation and how these forms themselves structure orientations in time.

Additionally, the newness of new media emerges from the open and unpredictable nature of media processes and the ability of these processes to interact and interrupt each other. The experience of newness is an experience of instability and interference. This means that the question of new media centers not on technological things that can be isolated as distinct entities but on relationships among media practices and processes of mediation.

Accordingly, the new media stories that readers will encounter in this issue are neither stories about laptops, tablets, and smartphones nor tales from Facebook, Twitter, and Flickr. Our aim is to reach beyond concerns commonly invoked by the pundits of new media and their fetishistic focus on new technology. Indeed, our considerations of the semiotic specificities traversing older and newer media only confirmed the unproductive nature of such a divide. As McLuhan noted, "a new medium is never an addition to an old one, nor does it leave the old one in peace" (McLuhan 1964:174). Depriving the new of its sequential sense allows us to undercut the exceptional status of the present, and thus avoid the perception of new media as singularly powerful technologies of social, cultural, and political transformation. Instead, the contributors to this special issue concentrate on interactions and interruptions that mark moments of public life in specific places at specific times.

In their essays, Kajri Jain, Patricia Spyer, and Martin Zillinger investigate relationships among media that have made processes of mediation a focus of public life itself. In her account of monumental roadside statues, Kajri Jain explores the way in which agonistic media have emerged over the past two decades in India (Jain 2017). What the massive monuments of mostly Hindu deities reveal are social antagonisms, which they expose and intensify. Drawing on historical and ethnographic

research, Jain traces the emergence of a public that relies on religious patronage, paternalist projects of development, and populist politics. Tracing the proliferation of monumental statues across India's network of highways, she calls our attention to the interplay between these two forms, how, for example, gigantic religious icons are painted with the same color as modern cars, in ways that aesthetically as well as historically suggest a circuit between the old and the new, the static and the mobile, a circuit that is generating its own turbulences.

In her essay on the aesthetic of the cut and the accident, Patricia Spyer engages two media forms (Spyer 2017). The first media form is the Muslim VCD circulated in wartime Maluku, Indonesia, the second the Muslim Power mural. If the former's narrative unfolds through interruption and discontinuity, enabled technically by means of jump-cuts and close-ups, the latter, by contrast, aspires to permanence and continuity. Spyer goes on to suggest that there is a relation between those two economies of the aesthetic whereby the cut in the former contrasts with the desired wholeness and integrity of the latter. But despite such differences on a formal level, both aesthetic regimes integrate a constitutive indeterminacy as part and parcel of what Spyer calls "an accidental public." Both Jain and Spyer affirm the notion that any medium is at once a site in its own right, as well as a complex of agonistic relationships with other processes of mediation that prevents the substitution of one medium by another.

In Martin Zillinger's essay we find a similar tension between expansion and containment (Zillinger 2017). In Zillinger's study the competition is between trance entrepreneurs in Morocco who seek to generate publicity while circumscribing it within the bounds of morally and politically acceptable arenas that define a public in local terms. The bodily movements of the entranced are deeply shaped by the audio and visual media that are deployed in spiritual music performances. Zillinger then shows how ritual reliability can be maintained across multiple sites through the capacity of technology to adjust to local contingencies. This means that media do not simply frame rituals of trance, but they play an integral role in the production of transitions—and of transgressions—between different spheres of ritual practice. Together these three essays examine publics that replicate certain forms of the bourgeois public sphere but also depart from it. They suggest that the changing conditions of communication are challenging our capacity to understand the nature of publics.

From Publics to Publicness

The enthusiasm with which scholars turned to publics two decades ago, a turn often associated with the event of the publication in English of Jürgen Habermas's *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (Habermas 1989), has been superseded by a certain nervousness and skepticism over the adequacy of the notion to the contemporary political and mediatic moment. This discomfort is registered in the increasing recourse to a variety of concepts that serve to reframe questions

previously explored through the lens of the public: networks, crowds, swarms, infrastructure, the multitude (Borch 2006; Hardt and Negri 2004; Larkin 2013; Law and Hassard 1999; Mazzarella 2010*b*; van Dijk 1999).

One explanation for this loss of faith in both the liberatory and explanatory power of the concept of the public owes to a heightened anxiety regarding the central dichotomies of liberal political thought: identity and anonymity, freedom and control, and most dramatically, public and private. While a tension and instability between these binary terms is hardly novel, and indeed may be seen as an essential feature of liberal governance, the current insecurity and volatility of the boundaries and practices authorized by these notions has rendered them a particularly productive site for contemporary liberal inquiry, evident in the proliferation of scholarly and popular discourses on the dissolution of private life. These discourses also highlight how the contemporary compulsion to capture and disseminate on social media every aspect of personal life has made it increasingly difficult to recognize and sustain those features of self and society that cannot be accommodated within the formats and protocols of such media (Ravetto-Biagioli 2013). The very impulse to surrender nearly everything for public viewing is increasingly engineered into digital infrastructures. Our cell phones, for example, are jammed with an increasing number of applications, all of which encourage and facilitate the choice to publicly disseminate every personal impression, encounter, and event through the latest social media channels (Wasik 2015).

Second, the felt erosion of prior logics of public and private is being further propelled by the fact that the digital technologies upon which many everyday activities increasingly depend collect and archive untold quantities of information about us and make it available to interested parties, whether corporate or state. Through tracking and data-mining software found throughout the devices we use, we involuntarily transmit a record of ourselves to unknown individual, commercial, and governmental interests, including whom and when we call, what online content we view, where we travel, what we buy, where we stay, and so on. Such practices of data collection make personal preferences, desires, habits, patterns of attention, uptake, and response visible to others and, hence, further undermine the possibility of claiming a space of immunity from the illumination of publicity. We seem increasingly caught in forms of communication that encourage us to digitally surrender ever more dimensions of what we may consider to be our personal lives. The electronic footprints left by our fashion whims, political solidarities, hobbies, medical worries, and sexual appetites illuminate our lives in ways that destabilize prior organizations of visibility and obscurity upon which key dimensions of our subjectivity relied. The information gathered on our personal passions, desires, and interests by corporations are recursively deployed to structure and modify the online environments we inhabit, so as to better anticipate our proclivities in a manner conducive to increased profit taking by corporations. The search engines that we have at hand seem to already

know what we wish to know. The dream of personalized advertisement is not to transform our proclivities but to capture our preferences, anticipate our desires, and present us with a perfect profile of ourselves. Thus, the indetermination, unpredictability, and openness we value in public interaction is felt to be increasingly circumscribed by norms emanating from the algorithms of corporate strategists.

As many authors have emphasized, the public and the private are not stable sociological or political domains; these terms operate as flexible evaluative grid (Agamben 2015; Cody 2011; Gal 2002; Meyer and Moors 2006; Povinelli 2006). The analytical and rhetorical labor that these terms perform is always relative to the ethnographic contexts in which they are deployed as ideological frame to assign value to specific objects and practices. This is not to say, of course, that contemporary forms of data collection do not pose a threat to key dimensions of a liberal political order but only that such a threat cannot be analyzed in terms of a dissolution of a clear and stable boundary between public and private.

Third, as the National Security Agency documents published by Edward Snowden dramatically brought to light, digital technologies have enabled an expansion and intensification of practices of state surveillance centered on the collection of the electronic metadata generated in every digitally mediated act we undertake. In the so-called War on Terror, every person is now a potential suspect who is automatically subjected to secret surveillance programs with potentially unlimited reach. Enabled by the latest data-mining software programs, governments around the globe scan and analyze vast databases assembled from computer, cell phone, and credit card use, allowing state intelligence agencies to create complex maps of our social connections, political or religious affiliations, travel, employment, and other aspects of personal life.

In addition, states are increasingly involved in new forms of online intervention beyond surveillance. While state practices of regulating and censoring web-based content are the most overt forms of this intervention, state intelligence agencies are also involved in a wide range of digital activities, among them the creation of fake online persona aimed at shaping online conversation; developing hacking capabilities that allow access to, or the subversion of, corporate or state institutional targets; and the mass dissemination of state propaganda within social media channels.

Critical accounts of surveillance typically insist on the value of privacy. Yet privacy is not a remedy; it is the instrument that enables security concerns to expand to ever more domains of our personal life (Lippert and Walby 2013). Exemplary is the growing wariness around exposure to electronic surveillance and control that has become a concern of ordinary citizens who are worried about possible intrusions into their privacy. Technologies of electronic evasion and content deletion are now marketed as indispensable instruments of citizenly prudence, similar to home insurance and investment diversification. More and more people today seek out ways to cover their tracks, to disguise their online presence, both through such technological

means as encryption software and by attempting to ensure that their digital selves remain as incoherent and indecipherable as possible across the diverse channels of communication they use. The amorphous threat against which we are encouraged to protect ourselves seems to embrace everything from corporate spies, to independent data thieves, to the state itself. The global market for security solutions is expanding exponentially. Such solutions regulate, and thus enable, the circulation of information. What these solutions offer to the concerned citizen is a form of strangerhood, enabled by the same technologies that are threatening to abolish it. Once celebrated as an instrument of our unbridled mobility across the digital frontier, the avatar has now become the cage that may well entrap us.

And yet, it is worth remembering here that the avatar has always been bound up with the development and expansion of new technologies of information gathering and archive creation, its promise of anonymity always conditioned by expanding possibilities for identifying, knowing, and serving its users. From this perspective, contemporary anxieties around the avatar might be understood less as a symptom of a disappearing anonymity than as cipher of the rapidly shifting and unpredictable balance between visibility and obscurity within today's media ecology.

Michael Warner noted that the concern with personal freedom encourages people to "identify both themselves and their politics with privacy" (Warner 2005):193. This identification with privacy has resulted in a growing demand for personal security. The purpose of security, as a political necessity and technological challenge, is to create a "private public sphere" (Warner 2005). And that, it seems, is exactly what social media offer: the fantasy of a space of communication made up of private public spheres where one can enjoy the freedom of sharing snippets of one's life with friends and followers. Those who engage in practices of public "life streaming" do not necessarily think of themselves as speaking to strangers. What they typically imagine as address amounts to a "post-public sphere public" (Berlant 2011:223).

Rosalind Morris suggests that the current conditions require us to think "publicness beyond the public sphere, in the non-spaces of a networked world" (Morris 2013:100). What Morris foregrounds is a type of speech that operates independent of the social imaginary of the classic public sphere. This form of speech does not address strangers, nor does it require the speaker to assume the disembodied identity of a public subject. As Morris notes, social media "enable communication without relation, connection without mediation" (Morris 2013:106). The practice of posting makes it possible for people to publish updates on their personal and professional lives. The subject engaged in such a form of publicness "does not speak as appears to be speaking," the visibility of the speech trumping, if not outright eclipsing, the content of what is said (Morris 2013). Sustained by a sensory epistemology privileging the visual over the verbal register, contemporary digital forums foster practices of self-presentation and self-revelation bereft of the dialectics of representation and transfiguration that se-

cured the agency and coherence of earlier political mobilizations. As a consequence, mass mobilizations today, often established through such practices as crowdsourcing or viral text messaging, spring to life with little relation between participants other than the collective recitation of the rally slogans that brought them out to begin with.

This compulsion to make oneself visible within social media supports a withering of the dialogic forms of engagement, a shift to an ideology of publicity that emphasizes connectivity and circulation over relationality and response. Digital platforms invite people to show up, to visibly present themselves within spaces geared more toward exhibition and exposure than representation and transfiguration, and with little incentive to open oneself up to the uncertainties and contingencies of reciprocal relations.

The social aspect of social media is primarily defined in relation to icons of human interaction and intimacy, like "friends," "followers," "contacts," or "users" (Barker 2008; Chesher 2015). Whereas readers of Baudrillard would see this form of technological sociability as little more than simulacrum, others more inspired by Kittler's materialist thinking would reject at the outset any association of technology with a form of sociality (Lovink 2012). For many observers, however, particularly in the aftermath of the Arab Spring, the promise of social media lies in its capacity to facilitate collective organization, civic engagement, and political action. Online movements deploy communication technologies for fundraising, lobbying, rallying, campaigning, and community building. But to what extent has this explosion of publicness brought (new) publics into being?

Rebecca Stein and Joseph Masco examine this question carefully in their contributions (Masco 2017; Stein 2017). Stein focuses on the Israeli army and looks at the ways in which it increasingly deploys digital cameras as public relations technologies to counter international reporting about its military operations in the occupied territories. The challenge for human rights organizations that work in and on the same terrain is to reveal what the army's combat camera obscures. Significantly, both sides share an overreliance on and an overinvestment in the visual. The power of the image to uncover the truth is typically taken for granted. But the saturation of the visual field by networked technologies and the overwhelming stimulation of the senses have created a new opacity and contributed to a growing numbness. As Stein argues, the new photographic devices fail to do their work; they fail to deliver on their communicative promise. Paradoxically, the demand for more cameras goes along with a demand for less seeing. Visibility has become a fetish disabling the political (Dean 2002).

Similarly, Masco emphasizes that today's media refrain of constant crisis has lost its ability to motivate people and galvanize effective political action (Masco 2017). Focusing on two of the most important existential dangers of our time, nuclear extinction and climate change, Masco suggests that the inability to address these threats signals a new modality of governmentality that can accommodate failure without generating a demand for fundamental structural change. In America's me-

dia cultures, the language of crisis has become “a means of stabilizing an existing condition rather than minimizing forms of violence.” Together, Stein’s and Masco’s contributions highlight the pressure of public communication to constantly renew the sense of the new by virtue of an endless stream of information that only intensifies the growing saturation, obsolescence, and numbness that increasingly characterize contemporary media cultures.

The speed and scale of much of today’s media work against processes of collective self-formation that undergirded a modernist political imaginary and that contributed to the transformation of the space of public existence, the constitution of a shared perspective among strangers, and the honing of aptitudes and affective attachments that inform and empower modernist political projects. Today’s techno-mediatic conditions tend to undermine the conditions of intersubjective engagement needed to engender these forms of collective action and appraisal. While this in itself is not new and indeed has been noted by many theorists of capitalism (see, among others, Cray 2013), contemporary media environments intensify this process in the types of communication and interaction they mediate.

Politics and the Political

Any engagement with the question of new media must include the politics of media systems but also the mediation of the political as such (Hirschkind and Larkin 2008; Hull 2012; Rafael 2003; Spadola 2013). Within the democratic tradition that so powerfully defines and circumscribes the contemporary scope of our political imagination, the political potential of new media is often seen to pivot on the question of participation: that is, on the extent to which people are directly involved in the institutions that shape the conditions of their own existence. Often obscured in this view, however, is the fact that what gets refracted as direct is both determined by and contingent upon the structures that mediate and condition it.

A key aim in Chris Kelty’s contribution is to show how the current trend to think about participation as primarily a technological matter, a feature of our devices that is either working or not, impoverishes a much deeper tradition of thought built on this concept (Kelty 2017). As Kelty reminds us, participation is densely woven into styles of political argument, legitimating discourses, and forms of identity. In his essay, participation appears as a midlevel concept, one that operates in the interstices between political philosophy and administrative science, keeping a foot in each. From political philosophy, it draws sustenance from ideas about the conditions of human flourishing; from administration, it remains attentive to the practicalities of efficiency, control, and productivity. In this sense, it is entrusted to mediate and resolve the irresolvable oppositions of liberal society, between administration and freedom, bureaucracy and justice. It allows people to hold together aspirations from both these domains, a condition that makes it invaluable to modern society. Kelty notes that the solutions achieved by participation will always be close to their points of application

and perhaps, to some extent, always temporary as conditions change.

Even though technologies of tracing are threatening the strangerhood constitutive of publics, forms of anonymity have at the same time become an important force deploying those very techno-mediatic means. What is at stake here is how the erosion of one conception of strangerhood seems to reanimate new logics and practices of reinstating anonymity at the heart of public life. As Gabriella Coleman (2017) suggests in her essay on hacker politics, this anonymity is not given; it must be achieved by virtue of an entire social, cultural, political, and technological education. Coleman’s focus is on the Anonymous movement and its politics of protest and direct action. The essay traces the more general practical and historical conditions that shape hacker politics and that inform the political conditions of the heterogeneous activities they pursue. In her account, Coleman highlights the craftiness of hacking as a practice and suggests that it involves an ability to act with some degree of secrecy to evade detection from those who might impede one’s agency.

Politically motivated hacker groups rely on electronic skills and technical knowledge to engage in spontaneous forms of protest that support the freedom of the Internet. Coleman argues that hacker activism, despite a strong antiregulatory stance, is not reducible to a purely liberal political project. Hackers constitute what Kelty terms a “recursive public,” a public concerned “with the material and practical maintenance and modification of the technical, legal, practical, and conceptual means of its own existence as a public” (Kelty 2008). The type of activism that Anonymous pursues is driven by the desire of actors to make everything public, except their own identity. The social here is faceless, as though exposing the phantasmatic nature of the very infrastructures through which it operates. Paradoxically, the masking of identity makes identification possible: the term “anonymous” operates as a floating signifier; “it comes to signify a new and much expanded kind of anonymity that can potentially include everyone and anyone” (Ravetto-Biagioli 2013:180). Contemporary political activism seems to thrive on substitutability as its intrinsic populist potential; it hinges on potential belonging and, moreover, turns that potential into its very constitutive feature.

In view of these modalities of potential belonging, we think it important to reassess the nature of anonymity. Conventionally, anonymity suggests that the source of a message is unclear or unknown. In the case of confidentiality, the identity of the source is actively protected from public exposure. Attempts to preserve anonymity are paradoxically premised on technologies that enable the capturing and tracing of messages back to their sources. In a certain sense, the history of anonymity is thus always also a history of its disabling tools. For instance, the development of the telephone network in the early twentieth century produced the sense of a person who could hide behind the medium while speaking from an inaccessible beyond (Ronell 1989). What was identifiable was the origin of the call, not the person calling. Similarly, radio broadcasting emerged

in a climate of strict laws against “unintended messages,” a notion that was linked with nineteenth-century concerns about the ability of radio to promote radical political agendas. The ostensible aim of radio legislation was to protect innocent listeners from dangerous messages that were “not in the public interest.” This emphasis on regulation and control reveals the enormous preoccupation at the time with techniques of accountability in defining the status of subjects, including anonymous subjects. Thus, in the early days of the American radio the motivation behind the broadcasting of messages itself was archived as a backup resource in case the intention behind the message was lost or became unclear. The motivation behind a message was part of its meaning. This practice emerged in response to a rising number of legal cases related to the circulation of images and messages thought to be harmful to public decency. Implied in this normative space wherein messages were allowed to circulate was a growing awareness about the nonlinear nature of mass communication. Moreover, this form of communication was never just *with* publics; it was itself formative *of* publics.

To this day, the right to remain anonymous is legally sanctioned as long as one’s actions do not injure the very legal order through which such sanctioning is made possible. This order assumes as unquestionable the notion that communication must be controlled. Anonymity is thus inextricably linked with regimes of regulation and, most of all, with the recognition of the self as a legal entity subject to the law.

Both James Siegel and Michael Warner, in their distinct projects, observe how mass media have created the conditions of possibility for people to hear or see what was not addressed to them in particular (Siegel 1997; Warner 2005). For Siegel, mass media have become the stage for scenes of unintended overhearing: public communication opens speech up to a multiplicity of potential receivers—not just those who are addressed but also those who might overhear what someone said (see also Barker 2008; Berlant 2011:227; Morris 2017). For Warner, this multiplicity beyond the intended receiver of a message is itself intrinsic to the notion of the public. To be part of a public is to be subsumed under the logic of substitution; one can always overhear something else and become part of a discussion somewhere else. In fact, the notion of the public implies this very idea of an elsewhere. Warner’s emphasis on the public as a sign of the elsewhere is quite distinct from dyadic speech models, which assume predefined producers and predefined receivers of messages caught in a circuit of communication. The question here is no longer simply who speaks but through what media speaking is possible. If speech itself is always potentially anonymous, it is not because we do not know who speaks but because speech itself has become orphaned, severed from both producer and receiver.

The displacement of authorial subjectivity into the spaces of technological mediated dissemination relegates all messages, at least potentially, to the status of anonymity. In doing so, however, it simultaneously transforms what we conventionally mean by anonymity. The notion of the unintentional is crucial

here, but it operates under a different logic than the one predicated on conventional understandings of authorial subjectivity, of propriety, and of the subject in general (Asad 2008; Rose 1993). Rather than being signified in relation to an origin or a destination, anonymity has become the very expression of circulation. Anonymity is that which takes place when words, sounds, and images find themselves in transmission, suspended between origin and destination. As a number of contributions to this issue demonstrate, such anonymity appears today under a variety of social, cultural, political, and economic conditions.

In Winnie Wong’s account of Shenzhen, a Special Economic Zone at the forefront of the Chinese economic miracle, fears, fictions, and fakes share an analogous structure around which anxieties concerning the relation between the true and the false escalate (Wong 2017). Rumor seems to be the very foundation of this highly stratified metropolis animated by ever-shifting political boundaries, global economic forces, and volatile social transactions. As scholars noted, the force of rumor dispenses with the author as an anchor of communication. Rumor’s performative power derives from the absence of the author as stable point of reference (Bhabha 1994; Das 1998; Guha 1983; Rudé 1959). Its efficacy emerges out of its ability to maintain the indeterminacy of the source, which facilitates its errant spread. Circulation becomes the defining nature of speech without signature. Wong argues that locating rumor in a city like Shenzhen is essential to understanding the kind of transformations that are possible in contemporary China.

Wong reveals the most prominent and preferred spaces of rumor within the larger political economic structure of the region. Such spaces can even generate exportable rumor, much like the fake commodities that enter other equally porous borders, such as the triple border between Brazil, Argentina, and Paraguay that Alexander Dent examines in his essay (Dent 2017). As Dent notes, location is itself a highly porous notion, not unlike the digital environments that promise “to obliterate the customary limitations of here and now.” In Brazil and Argentina, a certain class of commodities is labeled as distinctively “Paraguayan,” a term used in order to denounce the quality of things that look hopelessly imitative and that, in fact, seem to be increasingly everywhere. Despite the fact that most of these “Paraguayan” goods are actually from China, it is the term “Paraguay” that has come to signal “an anxiety about a particular experience with respect to how technology and mediation, unchecked, can threaten the realness of things.”

In Rosalind Morris’s contribution the overhearing of speech triggers wider reflections on the nature of mediation, circulation, and anonymity (Morris 2017). Many media scholars have emphasized how the idea of transparency evokes the fantasy of a form of communication without mediation (Boyer 2012; Eisenlohr 2011; Meyer 2011; Naas 2012; Sanchez 2008; Schulz 2006). Media scholars Jay Bolter and Richard Grusin note that new media technologies appear to offer a transparent interface, a medium that “erases itself, so that the user is no longer

aware of confronting a medium, but instead stands in an immediate relationship to the contents of that medium” (Bolter and Grusin 2000:24). In her essay, Morris takes issue with this ideology of technology by exposing the political force of the fantasy. Morris examines a series of communication failures that characterize the heterogeneous public spheres of contemporary South Africa, demonstrating how the function of mediation has itself emerged as an object “not of deliberation but of an agonistic exchange about the very possibility of exchange.”

Orphan, Speak

In Foucault’s essay “What Is an Author?” the Beckettian theme “Does it matter who is speaking?” appears as a form of indifference charged with ethical potential (Foucault 1998). Yet speech that belongs to no one in particular can also come with the injunction to be spoken by everyone. In a recent essay, Didier Fassin described how defenders of free speech in France denounced citizens who refused to subscribe to the ubiquitous “Je suis Charlie” slogan (Fassin 2015). The political rally that was organized in France in the aftermath of the Charlie Hebdo attacks and that was supposed to demonstrate national unity is at the center of Zeynep Gürsel’s essay (2017). Focusing on the photographic representation of the rally, Gürsel examines the work that the crowd shot is doing when it is put into digital circulation. She describes how the changing conditions of news making have affected processes of authorship and authorization. In the attempt of “not missing anything,” international newsroom agencies no longer rely on the ability of professional photojournalists to take pictures but on the images that are already circulating in public on digital platforms. The aesthetic value of a good image stems not from its aesthetic properties but, rather, from the fact that it circulates well. Its effective spread is what turns it into news.

The crowd shots at the center of Gürsel’s essay show heads of state marching in front of the crowd. The irony of these images is not their fake nature, nor is it related to the fact that the same photographers who made the images exposed their deceit. Rather, the irony is that this artificially headed crowd appears in France, the land of beheadings, and of Foucault. In Foucault, the severing of the king’s head in the French Revolution represents the end of sovereignty as a model of power. The beheading thus postulates the end of the sovereign as origin of power. Henceforth, power becomes anonymous. It is everywhere—in circulation, so to speak. This is the kind of power that the heads of state are trying to capture by entering the space of circulation and assuming the characteristics of the crowd itself.

While the focus on circulation allows one to problematize the excessive investment in authorship and intentionality found within Western thought, discussions about responsibility and accountability have not received adequate attention (Berlant 2011; Butler 2005; Gaonkar and Povinelli 2003). Today, in our techno-mediatic milieu, information stored in books appears

as inaccessible because it is presumably imprisoned in a material form that slows circulation down (Lee and LiPuma 2002). In her essay, Mary Murrell explores attempts to improve the book’s capacity for circulation (Murrell 2017). Mass-digitalization projects aspire to liberate information from the constraints of its material form. Animated by understandings of the digital as medium of eternal preservation, these projects come with the promise of building future libraries with limitless capacity for storing information. As Derrida emphasized, every archive, including the digital archive, finds itself under the compulsion to expand the current collection and assemble ever more documents (Derrida 1996). Its orientation is toward the future. The morally charged metaphor of the “orphan” plays an enabling role in this context: “the orphan is a book that runs the risk of not being digitized and thus left out of digital libraries, and, indeed, the future” (from an earlier version of Murrell 2017).

Contemporary digitalization projects trigger shifts in the overall structural politics of archives, libraries, museums, and bookstores. As Murrell suggests, the digitalization of the book entails an entire social, cultural, political, and economic infrastructure, contributing to the formation of new practices of reading among publics. It is a process that involves massive legal battles around the rights that will enable the book to be (un)available online. Yet, the very attempt to rescue books from oblivion, she explains, risks subjecting such works to the status of the web, where everything ends up being a kind of orphan. Hence the metaphor of “stewardship,” adopted by engineers and entrepreneurs to convey the idea of a responsibility toward the medium itself. The steward takes care of the orphaned book without assuming the accountability of the author who conceived its content.

Digital media offer an unprecedented opportunity for the recirculation of older content. As Gürsel’s and Murrell’s contributions indicate, this is a techno-mediatic milieu in which content no longer simply exists in order to be circulated, but where it is the evidence of circulation itself that endows content with value. As the mechanisms of circulation and citation become ever more powerful, the value of content increasingly depends on its “citability” (Weber 1998). Citability, the capacity to circulate, becomes a mark of the thing that matters in the world and, hence, evidence and indicator of value. At the same time, the spectacular automaticity of the software for the tracing and tracking of circulation obscures the politics of distinction involved in the process of defining relevance and significance in the first place.

When Montag, at the conclusion of *Fahrenheit 451*, finally discovers the secret society of people who dedicate themselves to preserving through memory books that are threatened with extinction, he finds them living far beyond the city, in an Edenic forest, the natural home of the literate human soul. Only here, far from the techno-mediatic dystopia of the city, can the dream of reconciling nature and society, life and

thought, be achieved. This is a paradise of communication without mediation. Having witnessed the death of his substitute on television, Montag is told by one of the Book People how each in the community has perfected a method of recalling word-by-word the books they have read; how they are part of a secret network of people spread across the country who share bits and pieces of different books stored within their memories. The displaced, desocialized context in which they find themselves, combined with the bodily intensity of their routines of recitation and memorization, effaces the defining features of their own individuality. Author and reader meet within the same person, who identifies with the book she reads. Montag, we learn, will become the “Book of Ecclesiastes.” Not unlike the digital dream of a quasi-spiritual, dematerialized medium, here the redemptive force of the book is realized by its volatilization, its total absorption by human life itself. Medium and message coincide without remainder, because people themselves—as walking books—become the circulatory form that anchors humanity in its true essence. The tension between circulation and capture reaches its apotheosis in a form of life that oscillates between absolutes of mediation and self-presence and seemingly overcomes them. Here, Truffaut appears as a contemporary of the current technomediatic moment. For, indeed, at the heart of this milieu is a desire for an object that will overcome all differences, tensions, and contradictions. New media technologies are supposed to achieve this through connectivity, though in this technological dreamworld of contact and connection, the hierarchies and inequalities of the social world remain largely unchanged. It is our hope that the essays collected here will contribute to a social history of such new media dreams.

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