Mediation in the Post-Internet Condition

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This paper examines the dimension of mediation in the post-Internet condition through the post-Internet art medium. In the post-Internet condition, human and non-human actors, humans and machines, networks, algorithms and technologies, co-create conditions of life in a hybrid and liquid state of mediation. The paper discusses three important areas of mediatisation as highlights and indicators of the hybrid and multifaceted character of mediation post-Internet. These are mediated publicness, mediated self and mediated trust. The artworks discussed in this paper help illuminate the dynamics, tensions and experiences of contemporary mediation and act as examples of how important the role of mediation is in our understanding of the world and of ourselves in it and how vital it is to continue to explore and critically engage with its processes.


1. INTRODUCTION

The cultural transformations that have taken place since the popularisation of the Internet and the World Wide Web (WWW) in the mid 90s are numerous and deal with issues relating to the technological, social, economic, ethical, political, environmental and aesthetic domains. These transformations are often happening at the intersections of individuals and organisational structures, where for example, the roles of users and producers have become increasingly difficult to differentiate, or the role of cultural institutions and art in general has been constantly challenged and re-considered. At the same time, cultural spaces and practices – how and where culture takes place/being produced/being formed – have changed dramatically. All the above are the direct result of a world changed by Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) along with significant events and changes in the economic and political spheres of geographies around the world. The results of this transformation are full of complexity and contradiction. By being a cultural product of life with and after the Internet, Internet art (from net.art to post-Internet art) symbolises the drastic changes that took place on and to the Internet. Post-Internet refers to the new processes and conceptual dialogue that arose due to these social changes. It is a critical shift from discussing the Internet as a contained entity governing merely our digital interactions to saying something more about its ubiquitous presence and the reconfiguration of all culture by the Internet (Connor 2013).

This paper aims to examine the dimension of mediation in the post-Internet condition through the post-Internet art medium, in an effort to produce a better understanding around the changing nature of life post-Internet and very importantly, to encourage researchers at the intersections of sociotechnical and technocultural research, to consider the ubiquitous medium of Internet art as a rich and useful tool for their work. In the Posthuman Glossary, Clark writes about the post-Internet:

This rebirth of a condition defines a quantitative shift in the ontological treatment of digital-non-digital technological hybrids on both sides of the posthuman ambivalence. This includes interleaving with, and de-centring, difference through connections to previously out of reach global otherness on the one hand, and the use and reproduction of dominant, standardised, distribution, production platforms and protocols which redefine much of the space formerly known as offline, on the other (Clark 2018).

The concept of a ‘condition’ aims to create an understanding of exploring the historical present and to provide a framework for exploring its elements which in the case of this paper is the dimension of mediation. The main point of mediation in the post-Internet condition has to do with viewing the mediated experience on the same level as primary experience. Medication in the post-
Internet condition moves further than the digital cultural heritage (Zschocke et al. 2004), or the physical as digital through digital reproduction processes (Manovich 2001). In the post-Internet condition, the shift from analogue to digital is not a point of friction anymore while mediation through digital technologies does not rely on reality representation but rather on acceptance of mediated realities as reality. Post-Internet mediatisation processes bring together the physical, imagined, virtual and the hybrid (Manovich 2013). Viewing the mediated experience on the same level as primary experience has been associated with the work of many post-Internet artists like Parker Ito, Oliver Laric and Artie Vierkant (Quaranta 2015).

Mediation post-Internet is shaped by participatory cultures within network societies (Castells 2004; Castells 2012), where socio-cultural processes operate within an overabundance of information and contribute towards a constant process of creation, distribution, usage, manipulation and integration of information in all its forms. Mediation in the post-Internet context can be understood as a complex and hybrid process of "understanding and articulating our being in, and becoming with, the technological world, our emergence and ways of intra-acting with it, as well as the acts and processes of temporarily stabilising the world into media, agents, relations, and networks" (Kember & Zylińska 2012). A key concept discussed by Kember and Zylińska is that mediation entails recognising our locatedness within media as being always already mediated. This allows for a meta-level of mediation where engagement with the world happens within conditions of mediation that can be measurable and identifiable, but they can also be un-measurable and non-identifiable. The un-measurable and non-identifiable aspects of mediation in the post-Internet condition, hint towards the unprecedented, unexpected, unformed and unruled products of mediation where the networks and infrastructures of ICTs exist together with an infinite production of both human and non-human-produced knowledge, communication, experience, politics and culture. Human and non-human actors, humans and machines, networks, algorithms and technologies, co-create conditions of life in a hybrid and liquid state. In this mediated state, the human and non-human exist in a state of mutualistic symbiotic intra-action, meaning that human and non-human actors are attached by constantly exchanging and diffracting, influencing and working inseparably (Barad 2007).

To examine and understand this level of mediated life post-Internet requires a view of the Internet as more than its technical elements, systems, protocols and networks. The various processes of mediation that involve ICTs have definitely a lot to do with their technical elements, however, their biological elements are equally important in producing and driving these processes of mediation. Together, the biological and the technical elements are capable of generating new forms, unprecedented connections and unexpected events within what Zylińska calls ‘living media’ and ‘biomediations’ (Zylińska 2020). This shift from ideas of connected media and media life that examine a metaphysical ‘living’ condition as a result of the connectivity of the object to the world via the medium, to a living condition that both exists within and drives the mediatisation processes is a key element of how mediation in the post-Internet condition could be approached and understood. Mediation post-Internet can even be described as multidimensional and post-Internet artworks can be understood as art in the post-Internet condition instead of technologically-mediated art.

Any aspect of sociocultural production affected by the Internet can be considered as mediated based on its mediatisation processes, like mediated sociality, mediated entertainment and mediated consumerism. Three main areas of mediatisation are being discussed here as highlights and indicators of the hybrid and multifaceted character of mediation in the post-Internet condition. These are mediated publicness, mediated self and mediated trust.

2. MEDIATED PUBLICNESS

Publicness is one of the aspects of life that has been discussed in the last two decades as an increasingly mediated process. More specifically the mediation of publicness is linked to the rise of social media and how public engagement has been shaped by ICTs. The link between publicness and technologies has been extensively examined from the lens of the public and the media. Communities have always used media like newspapers, radio and television to create new publics, and form new connections amongst actors/users and the public (Dayan 2001; Harrison & Barthel 2009). To the extent they could, people have always used media to create public identities for themselves, others, and groups (Baym & Boyd 2012). The scale, pervasiveness, ubiquitousness and connectivity of the Internet and more specifically of social media, are what makes the level of widespread publicness post-Internet unprecedented. This increased level of mediated publicness depends on practices of appropriation of both Internet technology and web content within the context of participatory cultures (Christou & Hazas 2017).

The socio-cultural practices of mediated publicness are dependent on the appropriation of networked media tools, ICTs and web content. Smartphones,
cameras, editing applications and software are what people use to take photos and videos to document their lives or to simply create content for Instagram, Facebook, Twitter and YouTube. Social media are where people can post their content, engage with the public, consume content and participate in online social interactions. Platforms for social news aggregation and discussion and chat software like Reddit, Discord and Twitch, are where people can engage with specialised topics and form niche yet global communities. Countless sites dedicated to online news and content aggregation like Digg, Pocket and Fark, are where curation of the massive everyday social activity online along with community engagement and participation based on interests and topics takes place. All of the above and much more, enable activity by mediated connection to take place as part of a new form of mediated publicness.

Internet artists have been using these mediated public spaces to directly connect with global audiences without necessarily targeting art audiences. Online performances through social media are a great example of how an art experience can be designed for mediated public spaces. Amalia Ulman’s scripted performances designed entirely for circulation in Instagram and Facebook: Excellences and Perfections (2014), and Privilege (2016), are notable examples of this practice. Both works are premised on appropriating and acting out the expectations of the social media audience by “...turning a mirror back onto the fantasies of this public in order to expose their effects on how women perceive themselves” (Smith 2017). The performative nature of both Facebook and Instagram platforms, where identities and experiences are carefully constructed and curated for public consumption and approval (like, share and comment functions), guide the nature of these online performances where artificial situations are presented as real. These situations include plastic surgery and fake locations (staged photos) like cities and hotel rooms.

The Red Lines artwork (Figure 1) by Evan Roth is a peer-to-peer network performance. The Red Lines network connected users with servers in geographically specific locations to participate in the sharing and viewing of 82 individual pieces from the artist’s Landscape video series. Over the course of two years (2018–2020), 120,000 people in 166 countries connected to the Red Lines network. The work was commissioned via the arts organisation Artangel’s open call for proposals to produce a major project that could be experienced anywhere in the world. The artist has travelled to coastal sites around the world where Internet cables emerge from the sea to record the work’s videos (artangel.org). Red Lines investigates the physicality of the Internet through a public performance that any viewer could stream at home but also become an active participant to the work’s network. This is because of the Red Lines’s decentralised peer-to-peer network where a viewer becomes part of the network, streaming from other viewers who simultaneously stream the feed from them, anywhere in the world.

Red Lines is a network containing infrared videos of coastal landscapes that can be streamed to a smartphone, tablet, or computer by anyone, anywhere. By setting a device in your home or workplace to display this artwork, you share a synchronized viewing experience with people around the world. Filmed in infrared, the spectrum by which data is transmitted through fiber optic cables, 82 slowly moving videos are stored on servers located in the same territories in which they were filmed. When you view a network located video made in Hong Kong, for example, it activates the submarine cable route between Hong Kong and you. You then become part of the peer-to-peer network which enables this work to be experienced by people around you (Roth 2020).

Figure 1: Red Lines, Evan Roth, 2018-2020. Available at: https://www.artangel.org.uk/project/red-lines/

3. MEDIATED SELF

The reality of the mediated self – a concept that is not new or born through the mediated processes of ICTs and digital media – becomes extended in the post-Internet condition. As with appropriation or mediated publicness, the mediated self, moves further than the virtual image-body represented as a proxy or a stand-in for a ‘virtual’ world. The self in a state of mediation is what becomes the state of the self, post-Internet. Earlier technologically mediated representations of the self like mirrors, photographs and videos have allowed for new understandings of how the self can be seen by ourselves or others, in different representational mediums and different times and spaces. The number of interactions that ourselves can have online along with the abundance of spacetimes within which ourselves exists online, and the ability...
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To willingly or unwillingly control/archive/trace/manipulate/curate and exploit the image and activities of said selves, is what allows the post-Internet mediation of the self to operate within a previously impossible level of mediation. The extent of the mediation of the self, post-Internet is constantly expanding and with it expand implications relating to privacy, freedom and control.

The transformative possibilities of the self, online, whether that is in visual appearance, behaviour or action (Cleland 2010), allow for unlimited versions of the self. At the same time, the level of control or lack of control over these versions of the self, allows for new levels of embodied identities. The self as data, the self as avatar, the self as image, are all extensions of the self, contributing to new ways of seeing the self. The self post-Internet is mediated and extended and with it are our ways of seeing and understanding the self itself.

James Bridle’s 2015 artwork Citizen EX (Figure 2), examines the concept of algorithmic citizenship. The concept of algorithmic citizenship is based on the work of John Cheney-Lippold, first outlined in the 2011 journal paper ‘A New Algorithmic Identity: Soft Biopolitics and the Modulation of Control’ which discusses the capacity of computer algorithms to infer categories of identity upon users based largely on their web-surfing activities (Cheney-Lippold 2011). Bridle’s algorithmic citizenship is described as a new form of citizenship which is not assigned at birth, or through complex legal documents, but through data. “By downloading a browser extension, you can see where on the web you really are and what that means. As one moves around the web, the Citizen Ex extension looks up the location of every website visit. Then by clicking the Citizen Ex icon on the browser’s menu bar, one can see a map showing where the website is, and one can also see their algorithmic citizenship, and how it changes over time with the websites they use” (citizen-ex.com).

Citizen Ex calculates your algorithmic citizenship based on where you go online. Every site you visit is counted as evidence of your affiliation to a particular place and added to your constantly revised algorithmic citizenship. Because the Internet is everywhere, you can go anywhere – but because the Internet is real, this also has consequences... Like other computerised processes, it can happen at the speed of light, and it can happen over and over again, constantly revising and recalculating. It can split a single citizenship into an infinite number of sub-citizenships, and count and weight them over time to produce combinations of affiliations to different states (Bridle, 2015).

Heath Bunting’s ongoing artwork The Status Project (Figure 3), exposes how easily and comprehensively our movements and activities may be tracked when we provide personal information such as our name, e-mail, postal address or credit card details for even the simplest of Internet transactions (www.tate.org.uk). The Status Project, surveys a class system of human being management that produces maps of influence, flow charts of integrated logic and personal portraits for both comprehension and mobility. The class system has three layers, human being, natural person (objectified human being) and artificial person (generally objectified collectives of natural persons). Human beings can possess one or more natural persons and control one or more artificial persons and they are categorised in three different classes. Lower class human beings possess one severely reduced natural person and do not control any artificial persons. Middle class human beings possess one natural person and perhaps control one artificial person. Upper class human beings possess multiple natural persons and control numerous artificial persons with skillful separation and interplay. Some people have used The Status Project as a way to gain access to services, others use it to talk about identity issues and hackers see it as a source code to the system (Bunting 2007).
Since the birth of the Internet, there has been a constant state of tension between digital freedoms of expression and association, authoritarian restrictions on information and communication access and the development of Internet framing policies and national and international web and Internet public and private regulations. This level of tension is telling of the importance of continuing to expand our understanding of how trust in persons, institutions and systems is affected by Internet-related mediated processes. Acts and movements of critical practice and resistance like hacking, building of free software and open-source communities, digital resistance techniques and training sessions and circumvention devices and techniques, are all indicators of the complex trust/distrust issues that keep emerging. Early Internet art, net.art, is a great example of how artworks were directed towards exposing and bypassing the economic, juridical and technical obstacles restricting free data and information exchange and free development of software (Dreher 2015), demonstrating who how and which interests determine net conditions of the time. Post-Internet art has also been dealing with contemporary issues around control, power, trust and their processes of mediation. Subjects and themes associated with post-Internet artworks are trust in technologies and platforms, interpersonal trust/authenticity, trust in systems and governance and trust in information (disinformation/misinformation). Some of the methods post-Internet artists use to approach trust today are as follows: identity play, audience manipulation, critical interventions/hacktivism, algorithmic play, network mapping and social media propaganda.

4. MEDIATED TRUST

Trust in persons, institutions and systems is to a considerable extent, the outcome of mediated processes (Endress 2002). Specifically, communication of information, which is inherently a mediated process, is a determinate factor to how trust is built and developed. As the Internet has increasingly become the main space for communication, circulation and retrieval of information, a trust intermediary (Schäfer 2016), it has also presented important new developments in how trust is being determined and affected by the heterogeneity of online and digital media. Information is embedded in a flurry of heuristic cues such as ‘likes’, ‘shares’ and ‘comments’ which may influence how trust indicators are taken up (Anderson et al. 2014). At the same time, the platforms where information is being communicated and circulated are themselves objects that people can trust or distrust.

Figure 3: The Status Project, Heath Bunting, 2007-ongoing. Available at: http://status.irational.org/anonymous_corporation/

The Status Project, is a study of the construction of our ‘official identities’ and creates what Bunting describes as “…an expert system for identity mutation”. The work explores how information supplied by the public in their interactions with organisations and institutions is logged. The project draws on his direct encounters with specific database collection processes and the information he was obliged to supply in his life as a public citizen in order to access specific services; this includes data collected from the Internet and information found on governmental databases. This data is then used to map and illustrate how we behave, relate, choose things, travel and move around in social spaces. The project surveys individuals on a local, national and international level producing maps of “influence and personal portraits for both comprehension and social mobility” (Garrett 2012).
social media network can be safe?" Maybe the only way to keep Facebook – a platform that has been criticised for being complicit in and a space for spreading hoaxes and misinformation – from harming us is to hide everything (Ohlheiser 2018).

5. CONCLUSION

Both the level and nature of mediatisation processes have changed as a result of the social, economic, cultural and political developments in relation to the Internet. How the physical becomes digital through digital reproduction processes or how physical reality is being represented in digital space has been an important area of scholarship during the first wave of widespread Internet use and adoption of digital technologies. In post-Internet times, however, mediation is considered a precondition for most areas of social activity. Analysing the complex and hybrid processes of mediation in the post-Internet condition requires a broad examination of the myriad of intra-actions between human and non-human actors which operate by constantly exchanging and diffracting, influencing and working inseparably (Barad 2007).

As mediation is an important dimension of the post-Internet condition it is also a common theme in post-Internet artworks. The three main areas of mediatisation as observed by the processes of reviewing Internet artworks and discourse around the post-Internet, are mediated publicness, mediated self and mediated trust. The artworks discussed in this section help illuminate the processes, dynamics, tensions and experiences of mediation in the post-Internet condition. Performing for social media audiences’ expectations, critically manipulating social media applications, engaging Internet users globally in peer-to-peer networks, developing new methods that examine identity as defined by algorithmic processes and developing a platform that attempts to manipulate public opinion, are all perfect examples of how important the role of mediation is for our understanding of the world and of ourselves and how vital it is to continue to explore and critically engage with its processes.

6. REFERENCES


