Introduction:

Mediating Presents

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Abstract

This introduction to a special issue of *Media Theory* on Mediating Presents contextualises the thematic focus and outlines the central arguments of the contributions. It suggests it is both productive and necessary to think together 'the present' and mediation to understand how various interlocking aspects of socio-cultural life are currently produced, organised and arranged, embodied and affectively experienced. The contributions to the special issue see time not as a neutral backdrop to, but as actively constituted by and constitutive of, (digital) media, and develop broad understandings of both media and the temporality of the present/present temporalities. The special issue develops theoretically informed and engaged understandings of digital media presents, drawing from and expanding a range of theoretical traditions, including feminist, queer and anti-racist theory, science and technology studies, media theory, philosophy and cultural theory. They similarly take seriously an array of objects, practices and processes, extending from public and academic debates and figurations, mundane and routinised activities, the affordances of specific platforms and computational and data-driven software.

Keywords

Media, digital media, mediation, the present, time, temporality, affect

As the experiential horizon between that which has been and that which is yet to become, the present moment involves zones of transition where life takes shape. The present can seem to fly by or be standing still in the lethargies of boredom (Ben Anderson, 2004); it may seem much like the moment's past or is acutely registered

through instances of rupture and crisis as one of transformation; or it can be that which is constantly taking shape through updates, notifications, refreshes, live feeds and breaking news. Conceptualised as both fleeting and perpetual, the present actualizes between the space of history and that of the future while simultaneously folding into both. In Lauren Berlant's (2008: 857) terms, it involves 'world-making in the just now'. The present is simultaneously supple, flexible and processual, contracting and stretching, and paced through a plethora of human-technology entanglements.

Digital media are commonly described as live, real-time, instantaneous and always-on, here and now (Coleman, 2020). Taking such definitions seriously but not at face value, this special issue explores the role of digital media in the making of the present, as well as the significance of a present or 'now' temporality to how digital media function, how they are produced, experienced and conceptualised. It is our premise that thinking together 'the present' and mediation is both productive and necessary for understanding how various interlocking aspects of socio-cultural life are currently organised and patterned. Indeed, from what Berlant (2011) calls the 'impasse' of contemporary liberal capitalism where crises are ongoing and ordinary to debates about the cultures of distraction and sleeplessness that digital media are seen to feed and cause (e.g. Hassan, 2012; Crary, 2014), mediated presents play a crucial role in the making and re-making of power and politics on levels micro, macro and many things in-between.

This special issue sees time not as a neutral backdrop to, but as actively constituted by – and as constitutive of – (digital) media. In doing so, it develops a broad understanding of media and attends to what Sarah Kember and Joanna Zylinska (2012) describe as the all-encompassing and indivisible mediatisation of life. With 'mediated presents', we are then simultaneously addressing the experiences, implications and politics of lives lived in media saturated environments in cohabitation with networked devices, apps and screens, and the ways of making sense of the mediated present in academic inquiry and practices of everyday life. Taking cue from Berlant's (2008: 845-846) discussion of affect as entailing 'the body's active presence to the intensities of the present' that 'embeds the subject in an

historical field', we focus on the entanglements of human and nonhuman bodies (of technology, data and representation) in the making of mediated presents.

This entanglement has grown strikingly manifest in the course of the global COVID-19 pandemic during which large parts of this special issue were written. Stepping into an extended time of exception enveloping the globe at different speeds, waves and intensities, we have been pulled away from established mundane routines towards socially distanced sociability that takes shape largely through networked means. The historical field encompassing the present moment within the pandemic is one of anxiety perhaps and improvisation for sure, where limited physical mobility meets high increases in data traffic in social media, news sites, streaming media services, Zoom and Microsoft Teams sessions, and where future horizons are clouded by mists of uncertainty. As digital, data-driven technologies and their embedding within our everyday lives have grown ubiquitous and routine, it is necessary to ask how their rhythms shape the sense of time and, especially, how the sense of the very now takes shape.

The extent to and the acuteness with which our ways of sensing and making sense of the present come wrapped up with the cultures of data may make the current moment seem exceptional. The close relationship between developments in media and communication technologies and the organisation and perception of time has nevertheless long been documented and examined as an academic concern: from the the emergence of the Gutenberg Press and its gradual role in creating the 'imagined community' of the nation state (Benedict Anderson, 1983) to the speeding up of communication and perception with the wireless telegraph, radio and television (Kracauer, 1995; Postman, 1985) to video recorder 'time shifting' in the 1980s leading to debates about the fragmentation of audiences and the mediated formation of social bonds, attitudes and belonging (e.g. Van der Bulck, 1999).

Both tapping into and disconnected from these long-standing concerns, a fast-expanding field of scholarship is exploring how digital media are involved in organizing our sense of the present and the past. In what Judy Wajcman (2014: 4) identifies as 'a time-pressure paradox', people have more leisure time than ever, yet a general feeling of harriedness leads to a sense of time accelerating or even running out – a development countered with 'slow media' and digital detoxes aimed to aid

one's fuller presence in the here and the now (Syvertsen and Enli, 2019). Digital media shapes the ways of perceiving the memory and the past (e.g. Hoskins, 2017; Neiger et al., 2011) and gives rise to plural mediated temporalities by speeding up time, fixing it in data storage and retrieval, and stretching and jamming it in lags and delays both perceptible and not (Lohmeier et al., 2020: 1522). Contributing to the heterogeneous body of work on temporality and digital media, this special issue focuses especially on the present; indeed, it is the first edited collection to make the present its main concern. If data capitalism operates through immediacy, archival and predictive time, as Veronica Barassi (2020) proposes, then the present moment is where these temporalities intermesh, actualize and become registered.

Contributions to the special issue

The complex intermeshing of attention and distraction, boredom and liveliness are of concern in Susanna Paasonen's investigation of minor mundane enchantments and pervasive affective ambiguities connected to them. 'Distracted Present, Golden Past?' examines generalizing diagnoses in both academia and journalism where the present, in its media-saturated forms, is seen as giving rise to ubiquitous distraction, boredom and flatness. Paasonen questions the figures of lost pasts that these narratives evoke and argues for a more complicated understanding of the present as cut through by diverse rhythms of media that become differently registered and lived. In doing so, Paasonen attends to ambiguity, enchantment and heterogeneity, mapping out an approach for media theory to examine the multiplicity of the mediated present that remains captivated by networked connectivity.

In 'Im/possible Boredom: Rethinking the Present of the Gamer Subject', Liu Xin challenges the juxtaposition of presence and boredom and examines the active dis/engagement of gaming, where boredom is anticipated, desired and maintained by and through hyper-casual gaming. Writing in the context of shrunk space and paused time of COVID-19 lockdown in China, Xin focuses on bodies stalled in motion and examines the intersections of boredom and care in how gamer subjects live out and make sense of time. She argues that such boredom functions through a multi-layered extensive present, whereby multiple temporalities are felt and displaced at the same time, for example in terms of the rhythms of the fall, bounce and death of the ball in

the game, the adverts that interrupt play, and of her fingers and breath as she swipes across the screen, as well as the 'repetitious timeless time of the game itself'. Thinking through the resonances between the affective value of gaming boredom and that experienced by many of those who stay at home or in hospital or care homes in China – and elsewhere – under the conditions of the pandemic, Xin formulates an understanding of care where the temporality of boredom is central to the mundane but extraordinary manifestations of living in this present.

Drawing on empirical research with digital media professionals and school students about the times of digital media, Rebecca Coleman investigates another mundane but ubiquitous digital media activity – refreshing – drawing out its involvement in the production of a present temporality. The article, 'Refresh: On the Temporalities of Digital Media "Re's"', examines what the prefix 're' might have to offer an understanding of the present temporalities of the refresh, arguing that it highlights the multiplicity and suppleness of the present, which is, at once, understood and experienced by the participants in her study as creating anew, going back, being behind or after, as well as repeating, again and again. Building on this latter definition of 'the re' as again and again, Coleman moves across differing scales of embodiment, experience and culture to posit that the temporalities of refreshing be understood in terms of what Raymond Williams (1977) terms a structure of feeling; an 'active', 'flexible', 'temporal present', composed of ordinary mediated practices, that characterises the qualities of experience at a specific historical moment.

Ella Harris also thinks with the concept of structures of feeling in her paper, 'Connecting Present Moments and Present Eras with Interactive Documentary'. Her examination of the present is through a focus on pop-up culture, which she argues can obscure wider processes of precarity through its celebration of ephemerality and unpredictability. She explores the present temporalities of pop-up culture through the method of non-linear Interactive Documentaries (i-Docs), discussing previous examples of i-Docs as well as one she created as part of her practice-research: www.thetemporarycity.com (password TTC). She argues that, in offering users numerous pathways through multimedia content and facilitating various modes of interactivity, i-Docs are productive analytical tools for making sense both of present moments (as specific affective atmospheres) and present eras (as structures of

feelings). At stake in Harris' paper, then, is how the conventions and affordances of a specific digital media form – the i-Doc – may be designed so as to elucidate how these differently scaled presents connect and relate, and to communicate the political urgency to hold these two types of present together.

The affordances of media forms are similarly key to Chris Ingraham's analysis of the different presents of amateur sound-recording media, from the mixtape to the writable CD and playlists in streaming music services in 'The Present as Platform'. By focusing on the material properties of these media as platforms that produce specific presents, the article argues that, with intentional and algorithmic delivery, the affective synchronicities emerging when the thinking-feeling body finds resonances with music involves a method of capture and closure leading to non-events. Ingraham unpacks the temporal experience of 'The Sentence' on the now defunct Beats Music digital music streaming platform, where the listener completes a sentence so that an algorithm can identify the music best suited to their mood. For Ingraham, this algorithmic mediation instrumentalises the experience of the temporal present in advance of its happening, so that the present lacks surprise or unknowability; '[t]he music arrives already saturated with the feeling we have not yet had a chance to experience'.

In 'Horizonless Worlds: Navigating the Persistent Present of the Border Regime', Nishat Awan examines the types of time that securitised borders and legal regimes yield for undocumented migrants. Building on conversations with people caught between borders, and especially those with people in north Punjab attempting to make their way to Europe, Awan suggests that living in a state of the persistent present is characteristic for many undocumented migrants. Awan inquires into the kinds of spatial imaginaries that might be mobilised to understand such embodied spatiotemporal experiences and the kinds of globalized information exchange through databases via which borders are policed. Turning to the insights of volumetric geographies, whereby vertical regimes of spatial control and surveillance are critically examined, Awan examines the notion of a horizonless world, whereby ideas of linear time and space become untenable in relation to the perpetual presents and circulatory movements of the undocumented migrants she works with. She argues that, in order to be able to become oriented within such a horizonless world,

it is crucial to centre the embodied experiences of those who have inhabited such a world for so long.

The politics of volumetrics are also central in 'Figurations of Timely Extraction', in which Helen Pritchard, Jara Rocha and Femke Snelting examine the dynamic crossings of time and matter within volumetric geocomputation through the technocultural figuration of Consortium-Amalgam-Borehole. Their concern with the mediation of presents works across the conception of figurations as involved in presenting overlapping techno-scientific problems. Here, presenting takes on the meaning of an offering to think with as well as a means to make temporally present particular stories and their political and ethical implications. Pritchard, Rocha and Snelting build on a mixed methodology combining ethnography with practice-based experimentations with game engines and 4D earth modelling software to untangle the complex worldings that emerge parallel to, yet irreducible to, the logics of contemporary extractivist capitalism, and outline affirmative modes for understanding timely extraction differently through complexity and alliance.

Working with a different figure – this time Gabriel Tarde's figure of the sleepwalker – in 'Spatiotemporal Zones of Neosomnambulism', Tony Sampson explores the Neosomnambulist, or new sleepwalker, as a conceptual persona specific to the current moment where the seemingly endless timescapes of digital media give rise to states of simultaneous consciousness and nonconsciousness. In a state of constant becoming in the present and caught in loops of imitation and mimicry, the neosomnabulist can be conceived, for Sampson, as an affirmative figure pointing to novel ways of understanding community and communal action that reformulate immunological, racialized divisions. Sampson argues that this potentiality of the neosomnabulist may occur through a speculative mimesis whereby digitised processes and practices of imitation and mimicry are pushed or probed further so that self-identity collapses into indistinct and impersonal experiences, creating a non-linear spatio-temporality that challenges birth and death as the bookends of life.

The articles within this special issue develop theoretically informed and engaged understandings of digital media presents. They do not take either digital media or the present for granted, but rather interrogate what they are, how they work and what their significance is. They draw from and expand a range of theoretical traditions,

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including those concerned with feminist, queer and anti-racist theory, science and technology studies, media theory and philosophy, and cultural theory. They similarly take seriously an array of objects, practices and processes. These extend from public and academic debates about distraction and (digital) media effects and affects, to mundane and routinised practices such as sleeping, refreshing and making online playlists, to the internal dynamics of casual gaming and the relations between i-Docs and the organisation of space-times in urban pop-up culture, to software for visualising the earth, and to migration as it is encountered as geographical borders. In this sense, both 'media' and 'theory' are broadly understood and variously approached in order to examine in detail how mediated presents are produced, patterned and lived.

Acknowledgements

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