

## CHAPTER FORTY

# Reclaiming the Future with Old Media

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In the face of entrepreneurs' and tech companies' attempts to over determine the shape of what's to come, how can we participate in (re)claiming communal ownership of the future? In what follows I think through a series of possible answers to this question by first unpacking why and how the past keeps getting eclipsed by an ever-receding future we seem to have little to no control over. I then propose six interrelated values we might take from old media: slow, small, open, cooperative, care, and failure. All six values are intentionally opposed to: ungrounded speculation; early adoption in the name of disruption, innovation, and progress; and convenient quick-fixes. Rather than recapitulate these same logics and claim my argument is wholly new or groundbreaking, and contrary to those who have been named as participating in the “dark side of DH” with practices that are “rooted in technocratic rationality or neoliberal economic calculus,” my intention is to gather together tactics that many DH community members have already embraced and reframe them in relation to recovering past media traditions for the sake of a reimagined future (Chun et al. 2016).

I imagine this piece as being in quiet conversation with certain lines of thought on old or so-called dead media in media archaeology—for example, Friedrich Kittler's attempts to get around our inability to understand regimes embedded in contemporary technologies by way of excavations of regimes in old media; Wolfgang Ernst's attempts to escape from the grip of humanism by attending to the unique, material functioning of machines; and Siegfried Zielinski's notion of “variantology” or interruptions, “fractures and turning points” in the otherwise tidy fiction of the history of technology and his attempts to catalog as many instances of it as possible (Kittler 1990, 1999; Ernst 2013; Zielinski 2006). However, while these ideas have been deeply generative for media studies generally and also for those in the humanities who have needed a thoroughgoing justification for the importance of hands-on labs and centers dedicated to old media of all kinds, as of this writing it is not clear whether the particular German context of many of these works can be translated into a North American context where, in the last decade, the depth and scope of systemic/historical poverty, racism, sexism, transphobia, ableism, profound environmental degradation, and so on, has only become more clear. Jussi Parikka is right to assert that there is tremendous potential in media archaeology as an “innovative 21st-century arts and humanities discipline that investigates non-human temporalities and ... wants to address those material and cultural contexts and forces that are beyond our control”—but how do we tap that potential so that it more obviously attends to the socio-political realities of our time (Parikka 2012).



While rarely intersecting with media archaeology and even more rarely working to excavate media archaeology's untapped potential, DH has produced an increasing number of works that are intensely engaged with socio-political realities and that, intentionally or not, respond to what Alan Liu named the primary deficit in the field: the absence of cultural criticism, or, a lack of reflection on "the relation of the whole digital juggernaut to the new world order" (Liu 2012). Just a few of the more recent examples of the latter include the DH project "Land Grab Universities" by Robert Lee et al. (2020), Roopika Risam and Kelly Baker Joseph's *The Digital Black Atlantic* (2021), and Elizabeth Losh and Jacqueline Wernimont's *Bodies of Information: Feminist Debates in Digital Humanities* (2019). Still, how do we bridge media archaeology's investment in old media and rethinking the history of technology with the wide range of digital humanities projects that may not interrogate "the digital" or what we mean when we say "old" or "new" but that certainly harness the capabilities of the digital as a way to bring to light local and global injustices?

Rather than provide a definitive answer to the foregoing question, in this chapter I explore how an approach such as the one coined by Lizzie O'Shea, "future histories," could bring these two fields closer together. For O'Shea and me, future histories are overlooked histories which also, crucially, bear the potential to lead us into alternative futures. They are also arguments in themselves "for what the future could look like, based on what kinds of traditions are worth valuing and which moments are worth remembering" (O'Shea 2021, 7). Future histories, then, are fundamentally political—they are the groundwork from which we can enact positive change today and tomorrow.

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Twenty-first-century life in the West is now practically synonymous with self-appointed experts making seemingly neutral assertions on a daily basis about what's to come—assertions that are actually self-interested bids to own the future, or, more accurately, bids to own *our* future. Because they are necessary to maintaining the illusion that capitalism is and always will be right and good for all, these assertions are usually short on facts, long on speculation, and oblivious to the actual material conditions of an increasingly degraded everyday life. Take, for example, Elon Musk's claim that "If you get up in the morning and think the future is going to be better, it is a bright day. Otherwise, it's not" (Economy 2017). While it's laughable that positive thinking could make everyday life better now and in the future for those who are poor, sick, grieving, and so on, the perpetual generation of future-oriented rhetoric that's blind to material realities is still necessary to buoy up belief in the rightness of Musk's attempt to own the future of electric cars, space travel, solar energy, AI, public transportation, and whatever else pops into his mind on a day-to-day basis. Tech companies generally take a slightly different approach in their attempts to own the future, instead frequently declaring "the future is now!" and warning that unless we become "early adopters" of gadget *x* and embrace the same "tactics for disruptive thinking" as the tech companies relentlessly rolling out new devices, we will be "left behind" or "left out" of the coming future (Gutsche 2020). Regardless of the source, the result of these future-oriented rhetorical maneuverings is the same: the erosion of a democratic future.

Whether you're an investor or a tech company, a bundle of interrelated strategies for generating long-term profit underlies this rhetoric about the future. These strategies include an embrace of planned obsolescence—by intentionally designing and producing products with a built-in short life span that forces consumers to buy more products more quickly—often by preventing us from being

able to open up and repair their products, also known as black boxing. In addition to contributing to environmental damage from a never-ending cycle of consumption and disposal, as well as cultivating a sense of passivity in the face of our inability to repair or understand our devices, planned obsolescence via black boxing has also helped create tech company monopolies and labor inequities at all levels and at a global scale (as the consumer/worker has to work harder to spend more, more often, and thus have a lower quality of life which also makes it impossible to have the luxury of time to think otherwise) (Grout and Park 2005).

While planned obsolescence and black boxing depend on each other, they also depend on an erasure of history, just in case we dare to question whether objects from the (near) past are really as quaint, cumbersome, inefficient, and even primitive as we're told they are. More, planned obsolescence and black boxing also result in our alienation from the materiality of everyday life and its objects. I know, for example, that the MacBook Pro laptop I'm using to write this chapter is a material object but, beyond that general sense, I am utterly locked out of its inner workings and mechanisms and, should I spill the coffee I'm sipping on it, there is almost certainly no recourse other than to replace the entire machine. Unlike the roughly eighty-year-old manual typewriter that sits next to my desk and to which I have a deep attachment ~~to~~ because of the years I've spent understanding its sounds, behaviors, quirks, and charms, I have no such attachments to this laptop. After all, I've been told countless times that I should only keep it for three to five years. But, if it weren't for this supposedly "quirky" and eccentric habit I have of keeping old media around long after they should have been consigned to the trash heap, how would I know to even question the design of my laptop? Without access to the past, how would I ever be able to imagine an alternative present and therefore a future where our things are built with, for example, longevity, care, maintenance, and sustainability in mind?

I have written elsewhere about Apple's attempts to eradicate programmable computers with relentless releases of ever new versions of hermetically sealed iPads and iPhones that have short life spans and extremely limited options for repair (Emerson 2020a, 350). But Apple is far from the only corporation that attempts to erase histories of early personal computing which would allow us to know what computing was, could have been, and still could be. For example, in a blatant disregard for the decades when computers were some combination of kit or pre-assembled machine that was still open (both in terms of hardware and software) and extensible, Samsung released a video advertising their Galaxy Book in April 2021. Reminiscent of Apple's infamous ad for the Macintosh in 1984 which opens in a concrete environ meant to conjure up thoughts of a Soviet era Cold War bunker, Samsung's ad opens in another futuristic version of a concrete structure that, we're told, is the Museum of Laptops. The docent dressed in business attire stands in front of a sign that reads "The Laptop is History" as he encourages us to come with him on "a journey back to the time before we asked the question 'Why can't laptops be more like phones?'" (Samsung 2021). I can't be the only one who has never wished my laptop were more like my phone. Either way, if we had any awareness of the past we'd understand what programmable computers (ought to be able to) do, why they are important, and why a mobile phone can never be a substitute.

In 1967, just a few years after Marshall McLuhan first coined the term "information age" to describe the radical cultural shift underway because of changing technological media, he declared that "The past went that-a-way. When faced with a totally new situation, we tend always to attach ourselves to the objects, to the flavor of the most recent past. We look at the present through a rear view mirror. We march backwards into the future" (McLuhan and Fiore 1967). This assertion



FIGURE 40.1 Corona Standard manual typewriter from the late 1930s that sits beside author's desk. Credit: Lori Emerson.

that the present, and therefore the future, is saturated with the past—whether we are aware of it or not—is certainly accurate in principle. However, regardless of what is or ought to be the case, McLuhan could not anticipate the contours of twenty-first-century late capitalism and how it seems to depend on a methodical, persistent, and nearly instantaneous eradication of the past so that we are rarely aware of how the past informs nearly everything around us. In other words, now it's less that we “look at the present through a rear view mirror” and more that we barely have enough time to even register the present before it's replaced with another present—and another and another.

However, every once in a while we are awakened from this externally imposed collective amnesia and we stumble over something as seemingly magical and miraculous as a computing device from the 1970s or 1980s that still functions. Take, for example, the Altair 8800b computer from 1976 (Figure 40.2), (usually) still functioning at the Media Archaeology Lab at the University of Colorado Boulder—a hands-on lab that is a home for thousands of still-functioning media objects from the late nineteenth century to the present. Unlike the three- to six-year average life span of a contemporary



FIGURE 40.2 An Altair 8800b computer from 1976, housed in the Media Archaeology Lab. Credit: libi striegl.

computer and the even shorter average life span of a smartphone, and even contrary to our own experience of inevitably being unable to download system updates and each piece of software gradually becoming unusable, the forty-five-year-old Altair should not still work. But the moment we power it on, see the red LED lights flash, and hear the cooling fan begin its arduous work, the grip of the ideology of planned obsolescence loosens just a bit as we experience what should not be the case. And then, while we ponder the limitations on this 8-bit computer's ability to compute anything with any degree of speed, power, and even reliability we also cannot help but ~~to~~ marvel at the fact that the spare circuit boards sitting next to the Altair suggest that it can and even has been opened up, altered, and repaired numerous times; we also marvel at the fact that this box with switches and no keyboard, mouse, or screen presents an alternative trajectory for computing that never came to pass but that could still happen. In other words, machines like the Altair 8800b show us an entirely different worldview that is not dominated by planned obsolescence or black boxing and one that does not revolve around speed and efficiency as the only viable criteria by which to measure the machine as an indication of "progress." Instead, the worldview embedded in the still-functioning Altair is one that values slowness, care, maintenance, environmental sustainability, openness, transparency, glitch/failure and therefore it's also one that—contrary to futurists like Elon Musk and tech companies like Apple and Samsung—values the material conditions of our everyday lives.

Thus, in the spirit of the Altair along with all the other machines of its vintage and even earlier, below is a list of six values old media offer us to reimagine a different way of life today and tomorrow. Although framed in terms of future histories, this piece was first inspired by Lisa Spiro's

powerful 2012 essay “‘This is Why We Fight’: Defining the Values of the Digital Humanities” in which she lists values DH should embody or aspire to, including openness, collaboration, collegiality and connectedness, diversity, and experimentation. Throughout the writing process, I have also had in mind the document that Catherine D’Ignazio and Lauren Klein published as part of *Data Feminism*, “Our Values and Our Metrics for Holding Ourselves Accountable,” as well as other value statements D’Ignazio and Klein pointed me to such as those by the University of Maryland’s African American History, Culture, and Digital Humanities Initiative and the University of Delaware’s Colored Conventions Project (D’Ignazio and Klein 2020).

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## SLOW

Rob Nixon has documented the profoundly destructive power of what he calls “slow violence”—a “violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed [environmental] destruction that is dispersed across time and space” (Nixon 2013). But, if we think about slowness in relation to contemporary digital technology, is it possible that embracing the slow and the inefficient could help intervene in the ideology of planned obsolescence and black boxing I discuss above? That if we intentionally embrace slow media we also reduce the slow violence taking place out of sight? If we can recognize the unique capabilities and affordances of, say, the 1976 Altair 8800b without comparing it to the processing power of, say, a 2021 MacBook Pro computer, we might be able to see what “wait times can teach us about the forces in life that have shaped our assumptions about time, efficiency, and productivity” (Farman 2018). What else might be possible outside of the relentless push toward productivity, consumption, and waste? How might slow and inefficient media decelerate the frenetic movement of electronics from our homes and offices to e-waste sites on the other side of the globe?

## SMALL

The value of approaching the collection and interpretation of data in terms of the small and the local has been compellingly documented by Christine Borgman (2015), Yanni Alexander Loukissas (2019), and many others in both digital humanities and information science. We might also extend the value of small to individual media if, similar to the value of slow, we think in terms of adjusting our expectations of our machines so that they have more modest capabilities. However, the value of small starts to appear more compelling in the context of the networked systems connecting media. Given, for example, the state of our contemporary internet which is driven by the pursuit of profit by way of tracking, surveillance, and relentless expansion to every corner of the planet, what would be possible if we reverted to a culture of small networks populated by mostly local participants like the Bulletin Board Systems of the 1980s and early 1990s? These early, small networks seemed to create the possibility (granted, not always achieved) for meaningful community that extended into the offline as much as the online world (Emerson 2020b). Also, in part because of their slowness *and* their smallness, these early networks opened up opportunities for extended modes of engagement and discourse that are no longer acceptable in our current era dominated by an expectation of immediate, fast-paced communication.

## OPEN

One reason it's so difficult to conceive of an internet other than the one we currently have is because, despite the fact that the internet is built on open-source software, the vast majority of us will never understand how the internet works at the levels of software, hardware, and infrastructure. Parts of the internet are nearly too complex for any one person to understand while other parts (such as the submarine cables it runs on) are practically inaccessible. Also, even though the internet is in theory open to anyone to use, censorship is alive and well in countries such as China, Syria, Iran, Egypt, and Sri Lanka; and further, many people who live in rural areas around the world often have to access the internet on their mobile phones, which severely limits the range of things one can effectively do online (from applying to jobs to taking classes online) (Raman et al. 2020). In short, the openness of the internet is more fiction than fact. By contrast, think again of a Bulletin Board System (BBS) from thirty years ago that could have been owned and run by an individual who originally purchased BBS software that came with extensive documentation about how it works and how to customize nearly every aspect of the network. Openness, then, is not only about transparency about how things work; it is also about accessibility and a more straightforward ability to understand how and for whom things work. The latter is especially important to attend to if we want to avoid perpetuating implicit power structures through the mere appearance of openness (Schneider 2021).

## COOPERATIVE

Imagine if, like some early networks, our contemporary social media platforms were owned and run cooperatively rather than by corporations like Facebook or Twitter? Not only would we have the ability to determine the shape, scope, and functionality of our networks according to criteria that do not necessarily relate to potential profitability but so too would we be able to adopt cooperative governance structures for members, employees, management, and overseeing boards that have accountability to users/owners baked into them. While never explicitly named a cooperative, the Berkeley-based network Community Memory was collectively created by five people (Lee Felsenstein, Efram Lipkin, Ken Colstad, Jude Milhon, and Mark Szpakowski) in 1972 by connecting a handful of scavenged teletype terminals—all installed in coop supermarkets, record stores, and libraries—to a donated Scientific Data Systems SDS-940 timesharing computer (Felsenstein n.d.). From 1972 until its demise in 1975, the collective provided a computerized version of an analog bulletin board whose messages could be read for free while posting cost twenty-five cents or more.

Admittedly, Community Memory may not provide a relevant model for financial sustainability in the twenty-first century but it has certainly paved the way for a growing number of decentralized, privacy-friendly networks such as Social.coop. More, according to the University of Wisconsin's Center for Cooperatives, coops are often based on the values of "self-help, self-responsibility, democracy, equality, equity, and solidarity" and since cooperative members also "believe in the ethical values of honesty, openness, social responsibility, and caring for others" (n.d.), the structure bears tremendous potential for creating equitable practices that are more attuned than conventional corporations to the complex intersections of different socioeconomic statuses.



FIGURE 40.3 Community Memory Terminal from 1975, housed in the Computer History Museum. Credit: Kathryn Greenhill.

## CARE

The short life span of Community Memory raises another important issue: the need for care and repair of media of all kinds to ensure sustainability, in terms of the media themselves and also in terms of long-term environmental impact. Insofar as care and repair are both facets of maintenance, they are also, as Lee Vinsel and Andrew L. Russell put it, “the opposite of innovation” and therefore the opposite of whatever Elon Musk is perpetually dreaming up for the future. Care, repair, and maintenance are the bedrock of the “overlooked, uncompensated work” that “preserve[s] and sustain[s] the inheritance of our collective pasts” (Vinsel and Russell 2020). Related to the section above on cooperatives, currently, because most of us do not have a stake in any of the infrastructure that networks run on, we have very little to no control over networks’ longevity. However, if we return once again to the example of the Altair 8800b, machines that are built to be opened



up, repaired, and even extended have the potential for long life spans if we care for them and (know how to) repair them. As feminism has long established, care not only benefits human beings but it also—or it ought to also—~~extend~~ to an “appreciation of context, interdependence, and vulnerability—of fragile, earthly things and their interrelation” (Nowviskie 2019). In other words, caring for and maintaining the Altair 8800b well beyond what any computer manufacturer would say is its recommended life span is not simply about a single computer or its fetishization; it is about seeing the deep and broad impacts, on both a local and planetary scale, of our relations with the living and nonliving things of the world.

## FAILURE

If old media liberate us to embrace the slow, small, open, cooperative, and an ethics of care, then they also insist we embrace failure and glitch. When the Altair 8800b falters and glitches, as it does on an almost weekly basis, we are challenged not to consign it to the trash or the recycling heap but to be open to the rewards of its failure. Since the 1990s, glitch artists have been showing us how to see aesthetic value in unprovoked and sometimes even intentional failure—but so too have queer theorists such as Jack Halberstam who reminds us that “under certain circumstances failing, losing, forgetting, unmaking, undoing, unbecoming, not knowing may in fact offer more creative ... more surprising ways of being in the world” (Halberstam 2011). As I move toward ending this chapter, I would like to underscore that I, alongside many of the writers I have cited in this piece, am not merely writing nostalgically about machines from a bygone era—machines that sometimes, miraculously, work. I am talking more fundamentally about how old media provide one of many ways to imagine, as Halberstam declares queer studies also offers, “not some fantasy of an elsewhere, but existing alternatives to hegemonic systems” (Halberstam 2011). And it is often in that exquisite moment of failure that we catch a glimpse of future histories showing us alternatives to power or perhaps a way toward its undoing.

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