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Introduction

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Introduction

By Jenny Davis & Nathan Jurgenson
Special Issue Co-Editors

To theorize the Web is to theorize the self, society, and the world. Although digital social technologies are relatively new, the Web is hardly a ‘virtual reality’ or a ‘new frontier’; rather, it is a deeply embedded part of our existing social world, which has been well-described in many traditions of social thought. However, mainstream conversations about social technologies tend to emphasize the technological at the expense of the social. Such framings result in partial understandings of the Web, which are disconnected from questions of power and social justice—and from public discourse. Useful, nuanced thinking about the Web is too often hidden behind paywalls and academic jargon, while technology journalism too often fixates on stories of ‘progress’ and personal triumph without examining underlying ideologies or structural conditions.

We began Theorizing the Web in 2011 to advance a different kind of conversation—one that highlights novel ways of thinking about the Web that are conceptual, sharp, historical, and critical, yet also accessible and public. The event is both interdisciplinary and non-disciplinary, meaning we feature some of the best work about the Web from both inside and outside of academia, from a wide variety of backgrounds, including those who may not consider either ‘technology’ or ‘theory’ to be their primary area of expertise.

The Theorizing the Web annual conferences feature both invited speakers and presentations, selected through a competitive, open-submission system. The blind review process favors papers that advance clear theoretical arguments; represent a diverse range of perspectives; embrace accessibility by demystifying jargon rather than using it as a crutch; and center on concerns of power, social (in) equality, and justice. The conferences are supported primarily by a ‘pay what you can’ registration.

The first two events took place at the University of Maryland with support from the Sociology department. In 2013, the event moved to the CUNY Graduate Center in Manhattan. In 2014, the event took place in a Brooklyn Warehouse and for the first time expanded to two full days. And in 2015, the fifth annual event came back to Manhattan in the International Center of Photography’s then-unfinished new space on the Bowery. Along with these hosts and gracious registration donations, Theorizing the Web has also been supported by The New

Inquiry, Snapchat, Verso Books and early assistance was also provided by the University of Maryland iSchool, the Maryland Institute for Technology in the Humanities, and the University of Maryland's Stamp Student Union. All of these institutions have offered support without taking any editorial control, which lets us create events we'd want to attend. Finally, we would like to thank Interface for letting us do this special issue, which we started to put together between the 2014 and 2015 conferences.

This issue reflects and highlights some of the work being done within the Theorizing the Web Community. All participants of Theorizing the Web 2014 were invited to submit their work as either peer-review articles or shorter essays. The quality of the work we received was impressive, as was the thoughtfulness with which reviewers provided constructive feedback on article submissions. The special issue contains three peer review articles, eight essays, and one panel review.

Our three peer review articles come from Leigh-Anne Goins, Sebastian Benthall, and Angela VandenBroek. Together, these articles explore the role of public discourse and how digitally mediated platforms afford, reflect, but potentially also contest, status quo hierarchies of power.

Goins examines Black femininity through popular discourse around Quvenzhané Wallis, a child of color cast to play the originally White character of Orphan Annie. The author identifies racist and sexist

narratives as they play out in the comment sections of mainstream news outlets. Through these narratives, Goins argues, Black women are rendered pathological and morally inept.

The same digital tools that afford racist and sexist commentators to express their dismay at a Black Orphan Annie, however, are also those that facilitate the expression of Voice more generally. Benthall's piece takes on the challenge of constructing a public sphere using tools of digital mediation. Through the author's own art project—an open source Twitter bot—the article demonstrates an integration of theory and design. Using this art project as a launching pad, Benthall calls on both theorists and designers to explore the opportunities of networked publics in fostering meaningful communication.

Maintaining a focus on Twitter, VandenBroek theorizes about the success of the Curators of Sweden project. An example of #RotationCuration, Curators of Sweden is a Twitter account (@sweden) that transitions at regular intervals from one Swedish citizen to the next. By demonstrating the truly 'Swedish' character of the account, the author argues against technological solutionism, reminding us that technologies are always socially embedded, and must be understood as such.

Our nine essays come from Helen Stuhr-Rommereim, Molly Kalan, Joseph Staten, Elizabeth Saldaña, Megan Bigelow, Elizabeth Wissinger, Justus Harris, Brian Thill, and Janet Vertesi.

These pieces reference popular events, art projects, and changing forms of sociality to collectively remind us of the important connections between discourse, theory, and materiality.

Through the case of Manti Te'o, the college football player whose 'dead girlfriend' turned out to be a hoax, Stuhr-Rommereim examines digitally mediated subjectivities and the tension between fragmentation and expectations of a linear and coherent self.

Building on the themes of identity and death, Kalan examines how lives and memories are preserved via Facebook after a person passes away. Through interviews with the bereaved, Kalan poses important questions about how preserving life in the realm of the social obscures the permanence and inevitability of biological death.

Saldaña draws on empirical work from Nepalese protestors to show how the conditions of connectivity and geography shape social movements and public discourse.

With a focus on materiality, Staten theorizes the 'thinkpiece,' problematizing its privileging of political over aesthetic. Not only does this essay generate a useful definition of the 'thinkpiece,' it calls for writers to ground their work in the material objects about which they write.

Embracing materiality and the aesthetic, Bigelow translates emotions into colors. Using Google Image search, the author averages color schemas for an array of emotions—as identified through the “Emotions” Wikipedia entry—reimagining affect through an ocular lens.

Wissinger argues that the aesthetic of the everyday has become increasingly demanding. The documentation afforded and expected through social media’s pervasiveness requires extensive “glamour labor,” such that one is always camera ready; always prepared for spontaneity. This need for camera readiness has trickled from elite models, to fashion bloggers, to everyday citizens.

Both Harris and Thill work to understand shifts from materiality to digitality. Harris describes his own participatory art installation which aims to increase empathy as people move in and out of digitally mediated communications. Thill explores the meaning of waste in the age of digital technologies. Digitality, Thill argues, is making “hoarders of us all,” as we find so much worth saving, archiving, and keeping for posterity. This is not just the age of FOMO (Fear of Missing Out), but also FOTO (Fear of Throwing Out).

Finally, Janet Vertesi writes about data tracking, privacy, and attempts to evade surveillance. Vertesi’s essay draws on her talk from our plenary panel: TMI Theorizing Big Data. Mike Pepi reviews this panel, recounting talks by Vertesi, Zeynep Tufekci, Kate Crawford,

and Winter Mason. Pepi first works to define 'Big Data,' and then examines its implications within sociality, discourse, theory, and practice.

Although each piece maintains a unique empirical and theoretical focus, the thread that holds the issue together is the authors' careful consideration of the digital as necessarily tied to the physical, social, and political.