

## **IN/VISIBILITY IN THE INTERNET'S THIRD AGE**

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**Abstract.** Current research (see, for example, Cheong, Martin & Macfadyen, 2012) on patterns of global and intercultural new media penetration and use nevertheless reveal the thinness of earlier utopian hopes for a technologically mediated “global village.” Nevertheless, new media are transforming local, political and cultural landscapes. What has (and who have) been made newly in/visible by new media and technologies? Participants in this panel will present and discuss aspects of their current research that shed light, in different ways, on questions of in/visibility in this, the Internet’s ‘Third Age’ (Wellman, 2011).

### **1. Context**

At the start of the second decade of the new millennium, there is increasing awareness of the development and use of newer “smart” and more interactive media that is happening with precipitate speed in many parts of the world. The uprisings in the Arab region in 2011, for instance, focused attention on the use of digital social media and acknowledged their role in movements for political engagement and change. Terms such as the “Twitter revolution” and the “Facebook revolution” have been used widely, conceptualizing the notions of “dynamic media” or “Web 2.0” as potentially radical, disruptive, and socially transformative.

Indeed, one might be fooled into believing that “old” debates about technology and Internet access and media control are dead, and that future work should begin with the premise that novel technologies are now driving changes in the way that ‘all’ people relate to each other, within and across cultures. Current research (see, for example, Cheong, Martin & Macfadyen, 2012) on patterns of global and intercultural new media penetration and use nevertheless reveal the thinness of such utopian and technological determinist hopes, which proclaimed the arrival of a new technological enlightenment and the inevitable development of McLuhan’s long-forecasted “global village.” At the same time, continuing work does not simply uphold the pessimistic predictions of dystopian naysayers who insisted (as did commentators on earlier technologies) that the

Internet and new media would fragment human relationships and cultures and divide us from each other. Instead, diverse studies give evidence of the multiple, often contradictory and apparently muddled ways in which our online and offline lives interweave and interact with one another, as communication technologies become ever more seamlessly integrated into human lives and cultures. What actually happens in praxis when digital media are implemented within and across cultures continues to be contested and negotiated within complex local, cultural and political conditions, and patterns of technology and media access remain uneven.

## **2. Panel Contributors and Contributions**

Participants in this panel will present and discuss aspects of their current research that shed light, in different ways, on questions of in/visibility in this, the Internet's 'Third Age' (Wellman, 2011). Whose images and words are now seen/presented/promoted and whose are not? Which gaps remain in current scholarship regarding cultural attitudes towards technology and communication? Which social contexts have, as yet, been dramatically understudied? Is objective representation of the realities of, marginalized groups better than no visibility at all, even if the people in question do not have access or skills to present themselves as subjects? Which realities of corporate or political control of media and communications may be masked by the new structures of social media? The following summaries and references give insight into their current research interests.

### **2.1. LEAH P. MACFADYEN (PANEL ORGANIZER)**

Leah P. Macfadyen (PhD, The University of British Columbia, Canada) is a Researcher and Instructor in the Faculty of Arts at The University of British Columbia in Vancouver, Canada. She is interested in the many and varied intersections (and collisions) between the social and the technological, and her research agenda includes educational technology studies, global and transformative education, and Internet research. Her most recent writings on aspects of culture, identity, and online education have appeared in edited collections such as *Digital Differences: Perspectives on Online Education* (2010) and *Learning Cultures in Online Education* (2010).

In 2011, together with Pauline H. Cheong and Judith N. Martin, Leah has co-edited and contributed to a new edited collection: *New Media and Intercultural Communication: Identity, Community and Politics* (2012).

### **2.2. LELIA GREEN, DEBBIE RODAN, AND LYNSEY URIDGE**

Lelia Green (PhD, Murdoch University, Australia) is Professor of Communications at the School of Communications and Arts at Edith Cowan University and a Chief Investigator with the Australian Research Council Centre of Excellence for Creative Industries and Innovation. The author of *The Internet: An Introduction to New Media* (2010), Dr. Green's research interests focus on audiences, users, and the social and cultural aspects of communication technologies.

### 2.2.1. *Negotiating a New Identity Online and Off-Line: The HeartNET Experience*

Debbie Rodan, Lynsey Uridge and Lelia Green have been working with an online community of heart patients since 2007. HeartNET has provided an environment in which to observe the interaction of new media, identity formation and the cultural positioning of heart patients. Imposing the identity of heart patient upon a person challenges the individual's notion of self. The challenge comes from the threat to an identity which to that point in people's lives might have appeared whole and stable. As a result of having a heart event, heart patients are named and positioned in particular ways by others, and in this respect a heart patient identity operates in ways similar to other identities such as gender, race and class. One reason for this positioning is the media's very narrow conception of a heart patient's identity which is constructed as either the tragically ill medical model, or the superhuman recovered tri-athlete. HeartNET is one of the few online communities that offers a range of differing identities to heart patients and the potential for a renewed idea of the self.

### 2.3. HERBERT HRACHOVEC

Herbert Hrachovec (PhD, University of Vienna, Austria) is Lecturer in the Department of Philosophy, at the University of Vienna, Austria. He has held scholarships and visiting appointments at the University of Oxford (United Kingdom), the University of Münster (Germany), Harvard University, Cambridge, MA (USA), Freie Universität Berlin, Universität Duisburg-Essen (Germany), Bauhaus-Universität Weimar (Germany), University of Bergen (Norway), and The University of Klagenfurt (Austria). His areas of specialization are analytic philosophy, aesthetics, and media theory. He was a member of the Academic Senate and Chair of the Central Committee for Curriculum Planning at the University of Vienna from 2005 to 2010. For further details, see <http://hrachovec.philo.at>

#### 2.3.1. *Possibilities and Contradictions in HTML: The Case of the University of Vienna's Unibrennt Plattform*

A crucial, yet often neglected, difference between visibilities is at the core of the WWW. Browsers render HTML code for general public use. They are fed sequences of semi-comprehensible ASCII signs and produce multimedia web pages. A site's underlying HTML version is no secret, but its visibility (and comprehensibility) is one step removed from ordinary perception.

Pronouncements carried by a web site can be contradicted by the underlying code. Mischievous collections of passwords are an obvious example, but there are more refined and theoretically interesting cases of contradictions between the appearance of a site and its "conditions of possibility". One instructive example is the popular web page of a student's protest movement at Vienna University in autumn 2009. Its appeal against neo-liberal, globalized edu-business stands in marked contrast to what is revealed by the HTML input.

## 2.4. KRISTIN SORENSEN

Kristin Sorensen (PhD, Indiana University, USA) is Associate Professor of Global Studies at Bentley University in Waltham, Massachusetts. Her research investigates the manner in which cultural identities, historical memories, and their associated traumas circulate through the media and public culture in contemporary Latin America. Her book, *Media, Memory, and Human Rights in Chile*, was published by Palgrave Macmillan in 2009 and is forthcoming in Spanish by RiL Editores. Dr. Sorensen has published articles in the *Journal of Human Rights*, *Cuadernos de Información, Peace & Change*, and *SECOLAS Annals*. She has also contributed chapters to the following edited books: *Democracy in Chile: The Legacy of September 11, 1973*, *Global Memoriscapes: Contesting Remembrance in a Transnational Age*, and *The 1980s: A Critical and Transitional Decade*.

### 2.4.1. *New Media and Social Change in Chile*

In recent years, new technologies and new forms of social media have taken on a greater role in promoting social change in contemporary Chile. The high school and university student movement for reforms to Chile's education system, a grassroots movement started in 2006 by young Chileans from a wide array of socio-economic class positions, which gained dramatically in numbers and visibility in 2011 and now 2012, relies heavily on social media in order to plan events, marches, sit-ins, and school take-overs, as well as to document excesses and abuses of the militarized police who confront the student protesters. While the students' use of online media does not replace their public activism in the streets and in the schools, it has become the primary method for organizing their public actions. Since Chilean youth are most likely to feel comfortable using this media, it is no surprise that they have been the first to use it so productively for organizing and bypassing more censored mainstream media outlets. Social media is taking on a more important role in other Chilean movements as well, including opposition to the development of massive hydroelectric power plants in southern Chile, the activism of Mapuche and other indigenous groups, and the struggle for more visibility and equal rights for members of the LGBTQ community in Chile. Nonetheless, access to this media is still limited and problematic for many Chileans.

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## 2.5. MAJA VAN DER VELDEN

Maja van der Velden (PhD, University of Bergen, Norway) is a Researcher and Lecturer at the Department of Informatics at the University of Oslo, Norway. She is currently investigating the relationship between human autonomy and automation, including the way patient privacy is negotiated on social media and continues her ongoing exploration of the relations between information technology and the diversity of knowledge. For further details, see <http://www.mn.uio.no/ifi/english/people/aca/majava>.

### 2.5.1. *Making the Invisible Visible*

*“Imagine a world in which every single person on the planet is given free access to the Sum of all Human knowledge.”* Jimmy Wales – Wikipedia founder (Oslo, April 23, 2012)

Also in the *Third Age of Internet and Internet Studies* (Wellman, 2011), research focuses mainly on the users, use, and content. Web 2.0 platforms, the technologies underlying blogs, social networks, wikis, etc., are ignored in these studies. The lack of attention to platforms (Bogust & Montfort, 2009) makes the agency of technology invisible (van der Velden, 2007). These platforms establish the channels and perform the connections through which information circulates (Langlois et al, 2009). Take the case of Wikipedia, the largest collection of user-generated online content and one of the most popular Internet site, with 460 million visitors a month. Wikipedia has *de-centered* (Cunningham & Williams, 1993) the authoring of knowledge but has a centralised platform with protocols and templates that define, order, and circulate knowledge. This platform is based on the values of a print culture with its focus on details, rational analysis, and linear storytelling (St. Clair 2000). The human knowledge that doesn't fit the Wikipedia platform becomes invisible, is marginalised, or *diasporized* (Olson & Ward, 1997). By including the platforms, softwares, codes, protocols, standards, and templates in our Internet studies – the way they shape users, use, and content, and at the same time are shaped by them – we can make visible what has become invisible.

### 2.5.2. *References*

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