TOWARDS A NEW MEDIA LITERACY
Resisting the urban space as a 404 page

Dr Mitch Goodwin
Faculty of Arts, University of Melbourne

Some Background

The intervention of media content in the public life of the city comes in many guises – the mobile screen / the corner store TV / the street projection / the media façade / the laneway love letter / the street art augmentation / the VR breakout space. Supported by commercial, cultural and civic media infrastructure the city is increasingly playing host to new forms of media content at various levels of complexity - from discrete media objects to temporary works of media art to components of a larger transmedia narrative. These projects are often built upon the convergence of personal, civic and corporate data generated from an individual's online persona. This interplay – previously private, mostly invisible – is morphing however, from screen space to public space, from surface representation to spatial replication. This transformation is so compelling and perceptually seductive that it can become something that we simply "fall into" (Turkle 2009) unawares of the exploitation occurring beneath the "subface" (Nake 2016). Willing or not, as we move and interact in the urban publics we are participating in new forms of cultural and economic seduction.

The sustainability of the industries which manufacture and embed the media that facilitate this engagement however will increasingly rely on new forms of media literacy if they are to produce genuine ongoing cultural and commercial value. Just as higher education is fragmenting into new sites of learning and new modes of interaction (Mackness, Bell et al. 2016) so too is our experience of media content in the urban space. (McQuire 2016) And yet, while the proliferation of technology has been near ubiquitous and the launch of solutions and platforms relentless, change has been slow. Both the city and the university in the 21st Century are plagued with usability issues and both have limitations in terms of our perception of their traditional function and the permanence of their physical design. As media innovates so too must its audience. We must see the value of creativity and cultural production beyond simple economics and only a media literate community can provide such an assessment and by way of participation reciprocal benefits to the media producer.

The Crisis of the Mediated Publics

Malcolm McCullough's critique of the commons as a site of contested ambience is the starting point for this examination, in particular his notion of "perpetual overload". (McCullough 2013) McCullough advocates for an information space that is designed; that has context and meaning and not act merely as a form of seduction. He references the information ethicist Luciano Floridi's definition of information as being 'true semantic content'. (Floridi 2007) McCullough insists that "being informed generally involves linguistically encoded meanings, at appropriate

levels of abstraction, all made intelligible by frames of knowledge." (McCullough 2013) These frames of knowledge and the value systems that organize them are changing, as Geert Lovink has pointed out, the 'social media abyss' does not create meaning but dilutes meaning (Lovink 2016) and in certain scenarios can create a net-negative knowledge space. (Allcott and Gentzkow 2017)

McCullough introduces the idea of 'intrinsic information' and its relationship to learned surroundings and our ability – or inability as it may be – to transmute meaning from mediated objects in the networked publics. There are lessons to be learned here, not only in terms of our cultural experience of intrinsic information, but also in terms of our ability to identify and adapt to change within – and on top of – a mediated urban landscape. McCullough's fear is of increasingly mediated public spaces that substitute intrinsic informational structures that rely on knowledge and context – what he calls 'embodied information' – with an information space that lacks this symbolic interface. The danger is that without an urban media literate population the potential of new media forms is restricted and new cultural forms become inhibited. When the media or the device becomes the seduction "technologically dependent sensibilities become less inclined to notice much else. (McCullough 2013)

This paper will address these concerns by investigating the role the mediated environment can play as a collective community learning project rather than just another layer of commercial and technological seduction. This goes to the heart of what constitutes the ambience of a contemporary public sphere built upon networked information and innovative media design. I will argue for a new model of media literacy to not only navigate this space but to deconstruct media as a form of companion text to the lived experience in the urban environment. Media producers on the other hand need to push innovation that is civically minded and user focused yet is cognizant of the commercial realities of media production. Furthermore, minimizing technical malfunction, reducing user fatigue and ensuring content is relatable and fit for purpose will help digital media content to proliferate and in turn help media literacy levels rise.

Media Production as Community Development

Advances in media content authorship and modes of media production demand affordable spaces from which the sector can pursue innovation. Local governments need to see the potential of media production as a nexus of interdisciplinary practice that fosters new cultural forms, new zones of production and – if we consider the 'maker space' model – new mixed-use sites of manufacturing and habitation. Understanding the maker narrative and how this might sustain an evolving creative media sector and the communities that support them should be a core component of the media literacy agenda. In a creative industries context, Carl Grodach has done some valuable work assessing arts clusters noting that while they "exhibit unique industry, scale and place-specific attributes," there is also evidence that they "cluster in 'innovation districts', suggesting they can play a larger role in economic development." (Grodach, Currid-Halkett et al. 2014) I would further posit that this extends to developing capacity within the community to effectively engage with emergent forms of media and culture.

To date, there is little doubt that the investment in screen technology, media architecture and augmented reality in the urban space has predominately been driven by a commercial rather than civic framework. This has resulted in a mostly semantic and predominately Situationist screen space that is a shallow bi-product of the exchange of capital and the forces that drive it. In this clash of media objects, the economics of advertising and consumption converge with the business of media broadcasting and production to produce conditions akin to McCullough's 'perpetual overload' and Paul Virilio's broadcast 'image loop'. (Virilio 2000) In this seductive hybrid screen space, the loop has become a hyper-loop of media reflexivity that ignores the user as individual yet leverages the user as a data point. To overcome this commercial exchange demands a form of literacy that goes beyond the conventions of contemporary media consumption to a shared understanding of its production and ultimately its function.

References

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Image Samples

This paper will be accompanied by a narrative of images to support the theoretical discussion. It would not be possible to convey fully what is intended without including a few samples here. These images are a part of an ongoing photographic essay by the author that explores our relationship with screen media in public spaces.