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The Paradox of User Control

Daniel Palmer

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The mid 1990s saw many writers celebrate the dissolution of fixed identity on the internet. Multiple and flexible online identities were largely seen in empowering terms – especially by theorists influenced by poststructuralist critiques of authorship.¹ Mark Poster recently coined the term ‘underdetermination’ to express the very lack of determining subject position in the new symbolic media of computerised information, as opposed, in his mind, to the standardised forms of print and broadcast media.² The subject of real time media appears to be intensely ‘self-determined’, or at least self-directed. As Sherry Turkle suggests, the computer screen becomes an extension of the self.³

New visual technologies invariably enter the consumer market with the pervasive fantasy of *user control*. An early advertisement for a Sony VCR showed an image of a man in an armchair, holding aloft a remote controller that promised us the ability to “master time, memory, and circumstance.” The rhetoric “experience the freedom of total control” referred to the simple ability to time-shift television programs.⁴ In the late 1990s,

this kind of language was prominent surrounding the internet (as in Microsoft's advertising slogan 'Where do you want to go today?'). But such freedoms are bound up with intense regulation. As Jonathan Crary notes:

the management of attention ... through the television set or computer monitor (at least in their overwhelmingly pervasive forms), has little to do with the visual contents of these screens and far more with a larger strategy of the individual ... with the construction of conditions that individuate, immobilize, and separate subjects, even within a world in which mobility and circulation are ubiquitous.⁵

By shifting the focus to the politics of control, Crary identifies a hidden logic behind superficial promises of consumer empowerment. In debt to Michel Foucault and Guy Debord, he continues:

Television and the personal computer, even as they are now converging on a single machinic functioning ... are methods for the management of attention ... rendering bodies controllable and useful simultaneously, even as they simulate the illusion of choices and 'interactivity'.⁶

Crary's distinctive pessimism puts him clearly at odds with the pervasive 'active viewer' paradigm of media reception theory.

Margaret Morse has also explored the subjective implications of media engagement, paying attention to the fabrications of individualised intimacy, both on screen and also in various forms of 'virtual' space such as the car or shopping mall. In these environments, she argues, a unique psychological space is created in which the outside is 'derealised' to the advantage of the interior world. The individual, she writes, occupies a "bubble" of subjective here-and-now strolling or speeding about in the midst of elsewhere".⁷ Indeed, notwithstanding television's 'familial' role, real time screens tend to be viewed in private situations, or function to privatise public space.⁸ The model here is the automatic teller machine, or more intensely personalised modes of address such as mobile hand-held devices (researchers of wireless technologies refer to mobile phones as customised data environments, enabling an intersection between the 'personal bubble' and the global datasphere).⁹

Raymond Williams' concept of 'mobile privatisation' – "an at once mobile and home-centred way of living" – remains valid to describe the unprecedented mobility of such self-enclosed privacies.¹⁰ The potential for public space to be contracted to the private on the basis of digital simulation is remarkable. Already private spaces are becoming further personalised: the car dashboard, the computer

desktop, the mobile phone, the personal digital assistant, and so on.¹¹ Steven Spielberg's science fiction film, *Minority Report* (2002), merely extrapolates from the present into the near-future, with its digital billboards literally speaking directly to passersby. In this lurid scenario of surveillance-meets-marketing, advertisers explicitly customise their message to the individual by scanning the retina of the eye.

In short, although ceaselessly promoting the advantages of 'user control' as a form of democratic participation, dominant forms of real time media conceal their tendency to isolate and separate individuals. The supposition of the active viewer as a response to the question of media determinism is inadequate to explain the emerging nature of such media participation. The 'culture industry' now seeks consumers who are mobile, who move between different media channels, and make meaningful links between different manifestations of the same story.¹² Thus the critical potential of 'active viewing' is considerably complicated by customisable media that anticipates variable ways of engaging with its 'services'. The *paradox of user control*, in fact, becomes that of the illusion of choice within which the user is offered up for a form of soft domination. Thus not only are discourses of consumer empowerment embedded in a neo-liberal political agenda – embodied by its pillars of individualism, freedom and self-expression – the 'performative subject' produced by most existing forms of participatory real time media is arguably the ideal flexible subject position enabled by contemporary capitalism.¹³

Customisation: The Social Relations of Contemporary Media

One of the striking features of emerging media technologies is the growing ability of consumers to automatically 'filter' what they receive, limiting their exposure to topics and points of view of their own choosing. For example, online news site allows users to produce personal newscasts, promoting themselves as place "where you decide what's news". The ubiquitous lowercase 'i' prefix, pioneered by Apple computers, has become the marketing symbol of the new millennium. In media culture, where attention is precious, marketers are continually inventing new ways of making consumption a more engaging experience. Making media more targeted to individual users has become one of the marketable outcomes of the real time media imaginary.

In the past two decades, a variety of writers have argued that contemporary capitalism involves a particular form of subjectification. One of the most important accounts is that of the German sociologist Ulrich Beck, whose work provides a compelling articulation of the impact of the systemic process of 'individualisation'.¹⁴ 'Individualisation' refers, primarily, to a process in which an increasing differentiation of possible 'life-paths' is

combined with an expansion of the number of instances in which individuals have to make decisions. According to Beck, one of the most striking features of contemporary life is “the paradoxical collective wish to live ‘a life of one’s own’”.¹⁵ As a sociologist, Beck situates this ‘individualised horizon of meaning’ within a shift in social structures, identifying a historical process of institutionalised individualism which has acquired new expressions and momentum in the past twenty years. The resulting ethic of ‘individual self-fulfilment and responsibility’ is related but not reducible to the demonised notions of individualism and consumerism.¹⁶ While it has a strong connection to the five century long development of the ideology of ‘possessive individualism’ – theorised by C.B. MacPherson as the cultural-psychological foundation of capitalism – Beck suggests that the process of individualisation has an original social and political orientation related to a process of *biographical liberation*. The flexibility of labour, the expansion of education (increasingly referred to as ‘lifelong learning’), the multiplication and mobilisation of social relations and the decline of forms of social organisation since the 1970s are cited as causes. Flexible, time-intensive and spatially decentralised forms of deregulated paid labour are only matched by the corresponding destandardisation, fragmentation and pluralisation of consumption. One result of this is that the boundaries between work and non-work are blurring, in respect of time, space and contractual content.

The role of computerisation in extending work into flexible, ‘free time’, is well documented. The computer enters the home as an all-purpose machine, combining work, leisure, and consumption functions: “once the computer is in place in the study or bedroom, its uses fully integrates the user with world of work in both the sense of consuming and creating value.”¹⁷ The internet enables new possibilities to work from home, or anywhere else. Not only is leisure time colonised, there is a blurring between the production and consumption of media. In exchange for the promise of a degree of control over the production process, interactive media offloads work to the consumer. As Mark Andrejevic astutely observes, this is presented as a technology-led consumer victory over the tyranny of the erstwhile ‘mass’ media: indeed, the recurring theme of celebrants of digital media, such as George Gilder, is that the homogenisation and top-down control characteristic of industrial mass production are rapidly becoming relics of a pseudo-totalitarian past.¹⁸

Manuel Castells suggests that the materiality of networks and flows of information are creating a new social structure at all levels of society. In particular, the constant change of roles and situations in a society defined by innovation, flexibility and unpredictability requires people to constantly redefine themselves in their roles. In effect, the personality is endlessly restructured to adequately fulfil the new functions demanded to manage the changing sets of

flows and codes that people are confronted with in their daily lives. Brian Holmes has written in similar terms of the ‘flexible personality’ as the subjectivity modelled by contemporary capitalism.¹⁹ Holmes suggests that the unattainable goal of ‘self-realisation’ is the new stereotype of performative consumption.

But even if we agree that participation in visual media is becoming a necessary obligation, rather than merely a possible option, it might seem a tautology to suggest that media *consumption* is increasingly privatised. It would seem to be axiomatic that consumption is a private activity. Moreover, the logic of advertising to personalise the address is not new either. In the 1960s, Herbert Marcuse, for example, noted the importance of personalised language in establishing the familiarity that is necessary for advanced capitalist communication: “Superimposed, standardized, and general things and functions are presented as ‘especially for you’”.²⁰ Judith Williamson has also explored the paradox of ‘universal uniqueness’ enabled by advertisements: advertisements speak to an *imaginary* individual which then *becomes* us, giving us the assurance that we are ourselves and that we *choose* to do what we do.²¹ As Williamson argued, the fact that we are trapped in the illusion of choice is the very function of ideology.

We would need to examine the media field across its various genres to uncover the precise mechanisms at work today. However, certain commonalities are immediately apparent. Consider reality entertainment media such as *Big Brother*, where viewers are given the power to ‘evict housemates’, and its connection to computer games, where vicarious ‘survival’ is the common thread in the intensely subjectified present-time of ‘gameplay’.

As media products transform themselves into media services, media content increasingly takes on the logic of advertising. Digital media considerably increases opportunities for marketers to map consumer preferences with greater accuracy. Commercial websites regularly plant ‘cookies’, automated digital agents, onto users’ computers; once it is set, all online movements (visiting sites, clicking on ads) are automatically tracked. Such information is aggregated into huge direct-marketing databases to create composite profiles of user habits. Large e-commerce sites already employ a variety of ‘intelligent’ modules today, such as Amazon’s ‘recommendations engine’, a ‘smart’ device which ‘mines’ collective preferences to make specific inferences. If you buy an item, or merely browse the site, it keeps a record of your tastes in order to make recommendations when you return. In this way, not only has the Web become a giant ‘focus group’, it has also enabled finely targeted marketing. An increasingly familiar experience of contemporary consumerism is a message, delivered by email or upon revisiting a site, along the lines of: “we’ve selected an assortment of new releases that we think would appeal to you.” Computer software builds in anthropomorphic ‘digital servants’

to whom the user can pose questions, and, increasingly, assign duties.

Castells notes that customisation – personalising the final product to the individual consumer – is the key to conducting business online, accomplished by “personalized, iterative, on-line interaction”. Such factors lead Castells to argue that the internet is “the material support for networked individualism”.²² A specific pattern of sociability rather than a psychological attribute. It is, he suggests:

rooted, first of all, in the individualization of the relationship between capital and labor, between workers and the work process, in the network enterprise. It is induced by the crisis of patriarchy, and the subsequent disintegration of the traditional nuclear family... It is sustained by the new patterns of urbanization... And it is rationalized by the crisis of political legitimacy...²³

I am proposing here that the real time imaginary thoroughly supports these processes of subject formation, and gives them an additional seductive power. Indeed, Castells seems to introduce a similar ‘aesthetic’ dimension in his consideration of ‘personalised hypertext’, a term he uses to describe the individual user’s multi-modal recombination of texts, images and sounds via the internet.

Interactive television, which is poised to become the dominant and most commercialised of real time screens, is likely to consolidate a process of ‘mass’ rather than individual customisation. As Raymond Williams predicted for interactive television way back in 1974, while: “the technology has clear possibilities in community information and politics ... most signs are that the effective definition will be of people as reactive consumers.”²⁴ Digital media technologies are pulling television in two opposing directions: towards *individuation* (in the sense that no two people will see the same program at the same period), and towards *globalisation* (in which the whole world will see the same program at the same time). Ceremonial or apocalyptic television, such as coverage of Princess Diana’s funeral or the World Trade Center collapsing or the bombing of Baghdad, may become the only shared televisual experience. As Castells writes: “a new communications system, increasingly speaking a universal, digital language is both integrating globally the production and distribution of words, sounds and images of our culture, and customising them to... individuals.”²⁵

How is it possible to ascertain the subjective effects of this shift to ‘mass customisation’, and of this insistent recourse to the individual in real time media culture? I am arguing here that the illusion of user control corresponds to the idea of contemporary

identity as a continual performative *task* of self-construction. Culture today is made up of roles that must be continually reinvented – ‘chosen’ – rather than fixed identities. The tailoring of the media imaginary also evokes Richard Sennett’s notion of the ‘tyranny of intimacy’.²⁶ According to Sennett, we resort to the intimate sphere because of the fear of uncertain reality. We are permeated with *narcissism*, not as self-love but in terms of the exclusive reference to ourselves, which asks: What does this event mean to me? The narcissistic subject searches for and expects ‘real’ and intense experiences only within the framework of their own needs and expectations. Sennett argues that the origins of the narcissistic self and the ‘intimate society’ – in which social relationships are treated as pretexts for the expression of personality – lies in the erosion of an impersonal public life in nineteenth century Europe.²⁷ Although written in the 1970s, Sennett’s analysis resonates even more strongly with our own historical moment – characterised by a process of personalisation which involves an intense investment of private life and the reduction of the public sphere. Today, the entire public sphere is swamped by forms of ‘public intimacy’ – from talk show confessionalists and reality television to the personal lives of political figures.

In summary, today’s new media is characterised by customisation; that is, it aspires to represent only the individual user’s interests, however crudely this is resolved in practice. The kind of world created by interactive or otherwise ‘participatory’ media is increasingly an effect of the interface as much as any content. To the extent that the rhetoric of user control goes unquestioned, we are ideal subjects of late capitalism. Critics and critical designers of digital media can work to keep open the paradox of user control by drawing attention to the gaping otherness within its logic of the self.

Notes

1. I am thinking of the influential ideas formulated in literary theories on hypertext by people such as George Landow and Jay David Bolter, who coupled earlier ideas of hypertext by Vannevar Bush and Ted Nelson with Michel Foucault and Roland Barthes’ criticisms of the author-figure and texts.
2. Mark Poster, ‘Underdetermination’, *New Media & Society*, 1.1, April 1999, 12–17.
3. Turkle is the author of *The Second Self: Computers and the Human Spirit* and *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet*. Turkle’s notion of the computer as a ‘second self’ is focused on the relationship between the self and the machine, and her research underlines the way that people experience the computer as an intimate mind machine.

4. Martha Rosler, 'Image Simulations, Computer Manipulations: Some Considerations' in Hubertus v. Amelunxen, Stefan Igihaut and Florian Rötzer (eds) *Photography after Photography: Memory and Representation in the Digital Age*. Munich, G+ B Arts, 1996, 36.
5. Jonathan Crary *Suspensions of Perception: Attention, Spectacle and Modern Culture* Cambridge (Mass.): MIT Press, 1999, 74.
6. Crary *Suspensions of Perception* 75.
7. Margaret Morse *Virtualities: Television, Media Art, and Cyberculture* Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998, 112.
8. Anna McCarthy *Ambient Television: Visual Culture and Public Space* Durham: Duke University Press, 2001.
9. Steve Silberman, 'Just Say Nokia', *Wired* 7.09 September 1999, http://www.wirednews.com/wired/archive/7.09/nokia_pr.html accessed 10 September 2000.
10. Raymond Williams *Television: Technology and Cultural Form* London: Fontana, 1974, 26.
11. Kevin Robins and Frank Webster (eds) *Times of the Technoculture: From the Information Society to the Virtual Life* New York: Routledge, 1999.
12. Henry Jenkins, 'Quentin Tarantino's Star Wars?: Digital Cinema, Media Convergence, and Participatory Culture' <http://web.mit.edu/21fms/www/faculty/henry3/starwars.html> Accessed: 26 June 2001. As Jenkins notes, "Contemporary popular culture has absorbed many aspects of 'fan culture' which would have seemed marginal a decade ago. Media producers are consciously building into their texts opportunities for fan elaboration and collaboration – codes to be deciphered, enigmas to be resolved, loose ends to be woven together, teasers and spoilers for upcoming developments – and they leak information to the media which sparks controversy and speculation."
13. My critique of the 'active viewer' paradigm here can be added to those writers who have, in recent years, argued that it is an academic form of market populism complicit with the fetishism of consumer agency demanded by neo-liberalism. See, for instance, Thomas Frank's *One Market Under God: Extreme Capitalism, Market Populism and the End of Economic Democracy* New York: Anchor Books, 2001.
14. Ulrich Beck *Risk Society:Toward a New Modernity* London: Sage, 1992. See also Zygmunt Bauman The Individualized Society Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000.
15. Ulrich Beck *The Brave New World of Work* trans. Patrick Camiller, Malden (Mass.): Polity Press, 2000, 53.
16. Beck, *Brave New World of Work* 152.

17. Frederick Wasser, 'Media Is Driving Work' *M/C: A Journal of Media and Culture* 4.5 (2001) <http://www.media-culture.org.au/0111/Wasser.xml> Accessed: 22 January 2002.
18. Mark Andrejevic, 'The Pacification of Interactivity' *M/C Reviews* (25 October 2001) <http://www.media-culture.org.au/reviews/features/interactive/mandrejevic.html> Accessed: 22 January 2002.
19. Brian Holmes 'The Flexible Personality: For a New Cultural Critique' *Nettime* 5 Jan 2002. Holmes' focus is the networker, individuals who aspire to mix their labour with their leisure, for whom the laptop is the symbolic portable instrument of control.
20. Herbert Marcuse *One Dimensional Man* London: Routledge, 1964, 82.
21. Judith Williamson *Decoding Advertisements: Ideology and Meaning in Advertising* London: Marion Boyars, 1978.
22. Manuel Castells *The Internet Galaxy: Reflections on the Internet, Business and Society* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001, 77 and 129. Castells' research supports Beck's thesis regarding the transformation of labour relations, especially with regard to flexible employment practices and towards 'self-programmable' workers (95).
23. Castells *Internet Galaxy* 128–9.
24. Raymond Williams *Television: Technology and Cultural Form* London: Fontana, 1974, 146.
25. Manuel Castells *The Rise of the Network Society. Vol. 1, The Information Age: Economy, Society and Culture* Cambridge (Mass.): Blackwell, 1996, 2.
26. Richard Sennett *The Fall of Public Man: On the Social Psychology of Capitalism* New York: Vintage Books, 1974.
27. The idea of expressive individualism has resulted in what Richard Sennett has called a 'culture of intimacy' that, ironically, depends on an atomistic notion of self. Because we are separate, we reach out to them by trying to express ourselves. The assumption is that we are essentially private and atomised beings, not social beings. In contemporary intimate society, politics becomes the means through which the personality of a 'charismatic' leader is projected to a mass audience by electronic media which render them both passive and largely isolated from one another.