

**gnovis**

a journal of communication, culture & technology

Volume 17 • Issue 2

Spring 2017





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# Letter from the Editor

Scholarship that encompasses the areas of Communication, Culture, and Technology may seem difficult to define. However, as we continue to look for ways to describe the world around us, the significance of research that exhibits the overlaps and interactions amongst these three fields of study becomes increasingly apparent. For this reason, *gnovis*, now in its tenth year of publication, has proudly existed as a journal to present what we believe are compelling examples of research in these areas.

The works represented in this Spring 2017 edition focus on the expansion of our conceptions of social activism and artistic expression as technological development continues to evolve and shape societies. Georgetown's Jewel Pereyra reveals the vibrant world of ASL poetry by presenting a history of its development and detailing its potential as an innovative medium of kinetic artistic expression; while Mark Gens examines the ways in which artistic expression and ownership have been transformed by the development of the Internet through his review of art in a "Post-Internet" era. Using a framework of communications theory, Georgetown's Tara Jabbari presents an analysis of select Science Fiction works in order to demonstrate the genre's ability to predict and mediate potential impacts of emerging technologies. Garima Bakshi demonstrates social media's potential as a tool for raising social awareness and mobilizing activism by examining its role in the well-known Nirbhaya case in India. To conclude, Amel Aldehaib explores opportunities for the development of social fabric and nation-building through a detailed case study of the work that specific youth organizations offered following the South Sudan Civil War.

In addition to publishing this, our fourth print edition of the *gnovis* Journal, we have continued to maintain our online blog as a platform for student opinion and expression. Furthermore, amongst our monthly events, we proudly continued the tradition of our annual academic conference, *gnoviCon*, during which we explored the theme of "Bridging Constituencies: Political Transitions and Communications." Looking forward, we are excited to continue our work and grow as a publication and organization.

Of course, this edition of *gnovis* and the success of our events and projects could not be achieved without the contributions of the *gnovis* staff. In particular, I would like to thank my fellow Editor-in-Chief, Julia Wardle, whom I have depended on for her assistance, guidance, and friendship throughout this academic year, as well as our Managing Editor, Elizabeth Jaye, whose organization and support has been invaluable to our team. While the successes that *gnovis* enjoyed this semester could not have been achieved without the hard work of our entire staff, there is no doubt that each component of our organization has been improved by the contributions of our Multimedia Directors Sushovan Sircar and Katherine Chow. This print edition of our journal alone would not have been possible without the time and effort that Katherine so graciously offered. Our achievements are also made possible through the support and guidance of the CCT faculty, in particular *gnovis*' faculty advisor, Dr. Leticia Bode. Finally, thank you to our fellow CCT students for your interest and support of *gnovis*.

Rebecca Tantillo

*Editor-in-Chief*

Class of 2018

## Editor Origins

This year is CCT's 20th Anniversary! It is a tremendous accomplishment of the program to have facilitated the union of so many brilliant minds who have synthesized their shared knowledge and then taken it into the world. Evidence of these minds at work was the creation of the *gnovis* Journal which not only created a space for the review, publication, and mediation of CCT content but also opened more possibilities for academia-driven innovation. *gnovis* now boasts printed journal publications each semester, *gnovis*-Live events including our prestigious conference gnoviCon every Spring, and a thriving blog with multimedia content. In this feature, we wanted to celebrate the tenure of CCT and *gnovis* by reconnecting with our roots. Here are selections from past editors of the *gnovis* Journal that talk about their current passions in Communication, Culture & Technology.

## I'd like to buy a "V" please

Julia mentioned she'd heard a story that the journal was originally called *gnosis*, like its Greek origin, and the disappointing truth as I understand it is that *gnosis* is what *gnovis* becomes under the autocracy of auto-correct.

*Note from the Editor: We at gnovis would like to stick by our current urban legend that gnosis, Greek for "knowledge" became gnovis with the innovation of more Visual and Virtual technologies that helped us to expand our journalistic enterprise. To each his own.*

The first year was rough. The journal had a good start, but we wanted to create some continuity or institutionalized process for the collection of articles for the peer review. That first year was also defined by the events surrounding the Car Barn: A tank was parked on the corner of M Street at the Key Bridge after the Pentagon was attacked on September 11. I'd only been in DC a few weeks from my native New York and remember that blue-skied Tuesday morning when we crowded in front of a television alongside Linda Garcia and others to watch the Twin Towers crumble to the ground. That year was also punctuated by the Anthrax scare at the Senate's Hart building; the sniper attacks in Northern Virginia and Maryland, and a man running around Georgetown wielding darts. It's no wonder that the CCT cohort of those years remains so deeply connected!

So during 2001-2002, highlighter bright signs went up in the Car Barn with phrases like *gno thyself* or *gno limits* to advertise the online journal, and by 2002-2003, after only a handful of articles completed the process, we went with the advertisement *gno kidding: gnovis is here!* The success of that year was a team affair. Steve Granese came in and created the digital back-end for managing the double-blind peer review; a generous grant from Randy Bass and the people at CNDLS allowed for us to create stipends for multimedia or film pieces, and Jerry Maclean and I reworked the mission. I cherish my time at CCT, even the tough times, and use what I learned there every day.

Erin O'Grady  
Managing Editor 2001  
Green Farms Academy

## Did all my education help me avoid sharing fake news?

If ever there was a word or phrase of the year with impact on our everyday lives, it's probably "fake news." We've all seen the articles decrying it, or at least the SNL parodies. And if you're reading this, chances are you're probably educated enough to be relatively good at distinguishing between fake and real news.

Having spent a large portion of my time at CCT studying the news, and an even larger portion of my career afterwards making it, I thought I would have no problem distinguishing between real and fake. Turns out I was wrong.

The truth is that, having been bombarded with headlines, factoids, clips and snippets that oftentimes sound so far from normal, I sometimes find myself going down rabbit holes and losing touch with what I always thought I knew about the world we live in. "In a world which really is topsy-turvy, the true is a moment of the false," writes Guy Dabord in *Society of the Spectacle*, and for many of us, the world has indeed turned upside down.

As such, I'm guilty of having shared fake news. Caught up in the passion for and determination of my own beliefs, the tools I always relied on to empower myself and communities have turned against me. The sad truth is that I feel like I only have the energy and time to click a button and make a hopefully poignant commentary, as I'm busy scrolling to the next story while juggling my family duties and a new career in a foreign country.

So here's what I've learned: It is one thing to study a subject, a set of works, a movement, and spend hours reflecting and writing on the topic. It's a whole new ball game when you're living in it real-time.

Daniel Waldman  
*Managing Editor 2004*  
Freelance Writer

## How the World Tweets

As more political leaders take to Twitter, the platform has once again inched its way onto the tips of our tongues. Aside from knowing how a handful of folk in the spotlight Tweet, how about the rest of us? How do we use Twitter? What do we care about? What headlines do we make?

Looking at Twitter's trending hashtags is one way to get at these questions and for this particular piece I draw on some of my big data research from #Rio2016, the top global hashtag of last year. Here are two quick takeaways about what #Rio2016 tells us about us:

- The world doesn't Tweet – it retweets. A random sample of over 17 million #Rio2016 Tweets around the 2016 Olympic Games shows that almost two thirds of all Tweets are retweets. Moreover, they are primarily retweets of well-known media outlets. This means that although #Rio2016 is circulated through our hands, it is shaped by others, including Twitter's own curators.
- While we may be watching the same event we are seeing different things. For example, English was by far the top language for #Rio2016 but other popular languages included Portuguese, Spanish, Indonesian, Russian, French, Arabic, Dutch, Japanese and Thai. Interestingly, Twitter activity for these language groups peaked at different times, suggesting that (other than Usain Bolt) we ultimately care about different things.

Consequently, we can think of #Rio2016, or almost any trending hashtag for that matter, as a popular tourist destination. Many of us head there, albeit for different reasons and during varying periods of time. However, like any tourist destination, we need to go beyond the popular spots and stereotypes (in this case, beyond the big data, too) to get at the underlying meaning and purpose of our visits.

Katerina Girginova  
*Editor-in-Chief 2013*  
Ph.D. Candidate  
University of Pennsylvania



## Podcasting: Back to Square 1

One of the many things I enjoyed while serving as Editor-in-Chief for *gnovis* was getting my first real taste of podcasting. Fellow CCTer David Shen and I hammed it up in a podcast about MAGfest 2014, and we both wanted to try something like that again. It took us a while, but we've finally gotten back into the podcast game with our new show called Square 1.

In Square 1, David and I seek to explore the issues and power structures shaping our community at the local level through interviews with the folks working to build grassroots power in D.C. In each show we provide a framework for thinking about a particular issue and highlight an activist doing the hard work to make an impact. By elevating the voices of community members struggling to make change from the bottom up, we hope to connect our listeners with specific calls to action that help them get involved. We also try to keep things fun by featuring a local music act in each episode. Our first two episodes have focused on local political parties and the fight for immigrant rights and keeping D.C. a sanctuary city, but we're just getting started. We have more episodes in the works taking a look at important issues such as environmental justice, charter school expansion in the District, reproductive freedom, and gentrification.

At its best, podcasting is an intimate medium that helps instill deeply human connections rooted in the sound of another's voice. If we do our job right on Square 1, we'll help you create those deep connections with some of the most interesting organizers and activists the District has to offer. If that's something you're interested in, check us out on Medium, Twitter, iTunes, SoundCloud, or wherever you like to plug-in!

Zach Schalk  
~~Editor-in-Chief~~  
Square 1

## My Goal for 2017: Make Micropensions Sexy

I've been consulting for startups these past 5 years, and have experienced everything from bitcoin and blockchains to architecture marketing. And for the most part, I've been able to execute a standard communications consulting plan for my clients. But this year, I finally met my match.

This year, I took on an India-based client (pinboxsolutions.com) that works in collaborating with governments from developing countries to implement micropension financing schemes. My task? I had to not only make pensions sexy to the public, I had to make micropensions understandable too. So what are micropensions?

*Imagine we have a non-salaried worker in India carrying out ad-hoc job assignments; what are the chances he will have a formal pension or social security plan? Cue Pinbox Solutions. Pinbox has created a digital platform to help non-salaried workers save. Once the employee has been verified using their Aadhaar identification card (India specific), they will receive a micropensions card. They can choose to deposit the money using their micropensions card at a designated outlet, or request their employer add the money directly.*

Still have questions? Me too. As much as I would like to declare that I'm a pensions expert now, I have to admit that I'm still exploring this complicated world of social security. But feel free to follow my journey on Twitter @pinboxsolutions (shameless plug).

Lois Goh Leyü  
Managing Editor 2016  
Online Communications Producer  
World Bank

## Civic Education Helps Us Mind the Gap

These are unprecedented times in our republic. Partisanship proliferates, technology has enabled information silos to be immune to discrepant view points, and polarization continues as folks flee the middle ground to find haven at the ideological polls. These difficult realities make me all the more motivated in my current project: I am working with CCT professor Diana Owen to examine civic education in middle and high schools across the country. This three-year initiative works in conjunction with the Center for Civic Education and encompasses over 1200 teachers and 50,000 students in 46 states and the District of Columbia. So far we have encouraging findings that civic education works—it increases students' knowledge of core democratic principles and their feelings of political efficacy and desire to participate. It also has important positive impacts on teachers, who gain knowledge and confidence. Seeing the professionalism and passion of the teachers and the excitement of the students gives me hope for strength and future of our democracy.

Isaac Riddle  
*Editor-in-Chief 2016*  
Research Assistant  
Georgetown University

## Bridging Constituencies: Political Transitions and Communication

This year was fascinating for the study of politics and communication. We saw an administration change to a president who was wildly unpopular with the media. We saw that same president try to balance his position as Head of State with personal media outreach to the public. We saw our two major political parties edge farther and farther apart. In our panel discussion at gnoviCon this Spring, we had prestigious names from the White House, the DNC, Georgetown, the GOP, and communications and data analytics firms discuss this idea of political transition. What political transitions are going on now that may not have to do with party politics? How can we as citizens and communicators shift our narrative toward unity and recognize universal communications needs for constituents?

Several of the panelists pointed out that polarization is not just happening between parties but between our political institutions and the public, and more noticeably, between the media and the public. The transition is not toward left vs. right so much as it is toward top vs. bottom. Voters feel isolated from the truth of what is happening in government and in civic society. The media industry has seen the negative effects of this as well. For example, campaign statistics show that more direct communication forms (mail, canvassing, etc.) are more persuasive, mass advertising on television reaches more people and is less costly per vote. The press is trying to juggle a faster news cycle, efficient communication strategies, and a public who consumes most of their information in an echo chamber. Inevitably, this leads toward click-bait news stories and disassociation with actual constituents. The panelists agree that there is a long way to go but are optimistic about communication strategies that can start to bridge constituencies. Watch more of this fascinating panel discussion on our website!

Julia Wardle  
*Editor-in-Chief/Managing Editor 2017*  
ASL Interpreter  
Purple Communications



# A Critical Analysis of Art in the Post-Internet Era

*Mark Gens*

The ability of technology to transform art, artist, and art world is not a new concept. The impact of digital technology and the Internet is yet another dynamic force. What is taking place is a redefinition of authorship, collaboration, and materiality as well as a need for new theoretical and aesthetic notions of how – and where – art is made, viewed, marketed and collected. These factors, the ever-expanding World Wide Web, and the pervasive individual ownership of networked devices by most of the privileged world, have ushered in what some refer to as the Post-Internet era. Rather than focusing on the validity of the highly-debated term “Post-Internet” this paper will focus on the developmental shift to which the term refers. This shift is an important marker in the movement of ideas and criticality, culture, and context. It is necessary to consider the digital art predecessors to the Post-Internet era. However, the exhibition *Art Post-Internet*, held at the Ullens Center for Contemporary Art in Beijing, China in the spring of 2014, is vital for its well-articulated curatorial perspective. Although the significance of the Post-Internet era is still being determined and defined at this moment, *Art Post-Internet* has made great strides in solidifying its look, methods, context and meaning. Post-Internet is not the end of an era, but rather a poignant marker with lasting potential in the continuum of art history.

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*Mark Gens is a multi-media artist, student, and writer in New York City. He received an MFA from Pratt Institute and is currently pursuing an MA in Media Studies at The New School. Memory, fantasy, pleasure, violence, masculinity, and desire are the primary themes in his studio practice. He enjoys writing about the intersection of art and technology. You can reach him at [markgens@markgens.com](mailto:markgens@markgens.com).*

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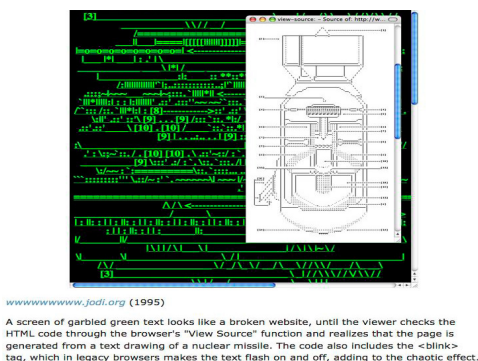
The ability of technology to transform art, artist, and art world is not a new concept. Photography, cinema, and video have each had a profound impact on art during the past century. The impact of digital technology and the Internet is yet another dynamic force. It's not a simple case of artists using technology as part of their practice or even the vast distribution potential of the Web, though these aspects are vital. What is taking place is a redefinition of several factors regarding how and where art is made, viewed, analyzed, and monetized. For example, authorship of a work of art may now be shared between artist and viewer. Viewers are no longer just passive lookers, instead they are participants who collaborate through interactivity and post-production. Another way in which traditional notions of authorship are challenged is in the prevalent downloading and re-purposing of images and texts from seemingly endless, and sometimes uncredited, internet sources. In addition, work that relies on specific hardware and software has presented complex problems for art institutions, the art market and collectors. Older technologies must be preserved in order to make older work viewable. And, how does one assign value to source code or virtual reality? These factors, to name only a few, plus the ever-expanding World Wide Web and the individual ownership of networked devices by most of the privileged world, have ushered in what some refer to as the "Post-Internet era". New media artist and theorist Marisa Olson first referred to the concept Post-Internet in a 2006 interview in *Time Out* magazine:

What I make is less art 'on' the Internet than it is art 'after' the Internet. It's the yield of my compulsive surfing and downloading. I create performances, songs, photos, texts, or installations directly derived from materials on the

Internet or my activity there (Cornell, 2011).

Olson's statement made clear a new relationship between artist and networked technology as a pervasive new societal condition. This novel and ubiquitous condition exists in the space of the World Wide Web where every day many of us get information, look at images, listen to music, watch movies and television, participate in blogs, view websites, write emails, play games, access scholarly writings, and curate and engage in art exhibits. Thus, the Post-Internet art world is not merely using technology, it is immersed in technology. The Post-Internet art world uses the network, but is also an entity in an immeasurable network. "Post-" whatever epochs seem to occur more and more frequently. Rather than focusing on the validity of the highly-debated term "Post-Internet" this paper will focus on the developmental shift to which the term refers. This shift is an important marker in the movement of ideas and criticality, culture and context.

The immediate precursor to Post-Internet art was Net Art. The only place viewers could engage Net Art was on the Internet. Net Art's appearance reflected the technology of the time and was often viewed on an early Mac's monochrome monitor: green glowing text on a black background. In other cases, Net Art took advantage of the glitches of the new technology to present abstract works with a very computer tech feel. Although utilizing cutting edge technology it appeared rudimentary and out of place in the art world. The work looked drastically different from what art viewers were accustomed to seeing. Nonetheless, some Net Art very successfully addresses issues of art history, politics, language, and connectivity. One notable example is [www.jodi.org](http://www.jodi.org) (1995). Upon



opening the site, one finds what appears to be a jumble of ASCII coding. The initial image, a mix of glowing green punctuation marks and numerals blinking against a dark background, is usually interpreted as errors or a failed attempt at coding, perhaps even a glitch in the software. However, for those who knew how to access the source code, an ASCII drawing of an atomic bomb was discovered. Rhizome founder Mark Tribe writes,

Jodi.org can be seen as a formalist investigation of the intrinsic characteristics of the Internet as a medium. But it operates on a conceptual level as well. In addition to experiments in glitch aesthetics, between correctly constructed HTML tags, the artists had inserted a diagram of a hydrogen bomb, as if to explode expectations about the Web as a medium (Tribe, 2007).

Joan Heemskerk and Dirk Paesmans, the artists behind [www.jodi.org](http://www.jodi.org), reveal aspects of how the Internet is constructed – code, software, pixels, animation – show us an aesthetic and conceptual potential that comments on what the Internet is and what it will become. In regards to the art market, Net Art’s ephemeral existence posed many challenges; Net Art is no less than a radical alteration of the traditions of art practice, art

viewing, art collecting, and art institutions. (Miranda, 2014).

In contrast, the evolution of Post-Internet art has sought to exist both on the Internet and in the real world. The real-world location speaks critically to the role of the digital in today’s art world and – perhaps to a fault – plays into the traditional hierarchy of art as commodity in the white cube. What was once practically impossible to commodify, market, or own (i.e. Net Art), now exists in tandem with a tangible, sought after collectibles. Beyond that, many museums and galleries no longer shy away from exhibiting digital art. Some even collect and maintain the appropriate technology to make sure the digital version can be exhibited in the future. Video artist Constant Dullart writes:

Sometimes it feels like Futurism all over again, made with Photoshop and promoted through Facebook to be shown in a white cube. These sculptures and prints will soon fill the pages of our favourite art blogs, and they will look just great. That is what they were meant to do, with and simultaneously without irony (*Beginnings + Ends*, 2014).

Dullart’s opinion is cynical but tame compared to Brian Droitcour’s scathing article about Post-Internet art published in *Art In America*. Droitcour sees Post-Internet as a poorly articulated, unsubstantiated, hipster subculture, photo-op... and not much more. “Post-Internet defaults to an art about the presentation of art,” he writes, “playing to the art-world audience’s familiarity with the gallery as a medium or environment for art, as well as with the conventions of presenting promotional materials online” (Droitcour, 2014). If we are, as Dullart and Droitcour suggest, right



back where we started in the whitewashed hierarchy of traditional art markets, I wonder what cultural, societal, political, and artistic shifts are marked by the *Post-Internet* era.

Although these opinions are worthy of consideration, they do not fully explore Post-Internet, they only tell part of the story. Droitcour claims that no one has been able to articulate the meaning of Post-Internet “with much precision” (Droitcour, 2014). Yet several artists and theorists alike have considered the subject. It is undeniable that we now live in an era where networks, links, sharing, access, format, and virtuality are part of our everyday experience and language. Volumes of images are routinely coded, seen, appropriated, manipulated, and redistributed. This amounts to a revolution in our experience of space, the status of the individual, the role of authorship, and our relationship to images. We live our lives in both the network and in the real world; if we can, why can’t art? Post-Internet adeptly critiques what has gone before and, at the same time, contextualizes our present state of existence. David Joselit, preferring the term “after art” to Post-Internet writes:

The work’s power lies in its staging of a performative mode of looking, through which the single image and the network are visible at the same time [...] What results in the ‘era after art’ is a new kind of power that

art assembles through its heterogeneous formats. Art links social elites, sophisticated

philosophy, a spectrum of practical skills, a mass public, a discourse of attributing meaning to images, financial speculation and assertion of national and ethnic identity (Joselit, 2013, Pages 39, 91).

The art market and the white cube are, in the Post-Internet world, just nodes in an expansive network that reaches far beyond the contexts of traditional art and exhibition.

Let’s consider Brian Droitcour’s example of Kari Altmann’s piece *Hellblau* (2008–12). The piece is composed of a light blue (hellblau) kiddie pool filled with water (HeK, 2012). In the water and scattered outside the perimeter of the pool Altmann has placed broken chunks of concrete covered with corporate logos, film stills and photos, all of which use this shade of blue. Droitcour’s description of her installation (as exhibited at Envoy Enterprises in New York) is rife with aesthetic put downs, “dingy,” “inexpertly assembled,” “flat,” “bad,” etc. (Droitcour, 2014). But judging art on aesthetic merits alone is archaic. Nowhere does he discuss meaning or idea or text or language or context. Later in his article he mentions that he saw an image of the installation on Altmann’s website which he describes as “vibrant,” and “good” (Droitcour, 2014). Almost too conveniently this justifies his assertion that the work is merely a photo-op. Missing from his critique is vital information such as how this blue is a very particular shade of blue often used in advertising, logos and gaming; hellblau is a corporate go-to color. In Altmann’s own words it’s, “an interface for control, distance, power, fetishization, lust, and omnipresent friendliness that acts as a sweet, high-pitched mask for deeper intentions” (HeK, 2012). It appears that Droitcour’s obsessive need to



Kari Altmann *Hellblau* 2008–12 Mixed media Dimensions variable



Kevin Bewersdorf *Mandala* 2008 Animated GIF

dismiss Post-Internet art has blinded him to the deeper and provocative meaning of Altmann's *Hellblau*.

As a counter point to Droitcour, Post-Internet artist Kevin Bewersdorf, whose work includes video, photography, objects, net art, and gallery exhibits, speaks directly to the issue of aesthetics and meaning, "I care very little about the material world, and I'm completely certain that the most profound experiences in life can't be contained by gallery walls, so the art object in a 'gallery space' for me can only represent a limitation, a disappointment. I try to deal with this by presenting the object itself as pathetic and mediocre, but the information it conducts as sacred" (McHugh, 2011, Page 41). Art critic and curator Gene McHugh responds favorably to Bewersdorf: "By reducing the sculpture's physical appearance to kitsch, but contextualizing it as the product of a 'sacred' Internet surf, Bewersdorf is able to say something about art that goes beyond technology: the aura of an art object is often not its phenomenological properties, but rather its testimony to a creative practice" (McHugh, 2011). McHugh's critical insight directs us to a more enlightened path where we can look for - and hopefully find - clues to the meaningfulness of Post-Internet art.

One of the most concerted efforts to establish what is Post-Internet art was the exhibition *Art Post-Internet* at the Ullens Center for Contemporary Art in Beijing,

China in the spring of 2014. Curators Karen Archey and Robin Peckham write in the exhibition catalog:

this exhibition presents a broad survey of art that is created in a milieu that assumes the centrality of the network, and that often takes everything from the physical bits to the social ramifications of the Internet as fodder. From the changing nature of the image to the circulation of cultural objects, from the politics of participation to new understandings of materiality, the interventions presented under this rubric attempt nothing short of the redefinition of art for the age of the internet (Archey et al. 2014).

The catalog itself is a Post-Internet work: a comprehensive, free, downloadable PDF that includes text, images, biographies and artist interviews. Each download is individually numbered, suggesting both its specificity to the downloader and keeping count of the number of catalogs viewed. *Art Post-Internet* is a well installed exhibit of two- and three-dimensional works. Some of the artwork appears handmade while others



Dara Birbaum *Computer Assisted Drawings: Proposal for Sony Corporation* 1992-93 16 drawings on plexiglas and custom aluminum frames, stainless steel

have a more technological look. The catalog's authors claim that the exhibition allows for, "substantive commentary and conversation" around the issues of "internet policy, mass clandestine surveillance, data mining, the physicality of the network, the post-human body, information dispersion and the open source movement" (Archey et al., 2014). Their ability to emphasize the multiple meanings and content of Post-Internet art and place that meaning in a continuum of art history was a very conscious effort to solidify the distinctive nature of the movement, "By contextualizing post-internet art within theory and art history, we hope to elude the inevitable relegation of these new positions to a fading trend" (Archey et al., 2014). Although most of the works were made in the four years preceding the exhibition, a few date back to the early 2000s and one piece, Dara Birnbaum's *Computer Assisted Drawings: Proposal for Sony Corporation*, dates back to 1992-1993. Birnbaum's piece is comprised of four expertly machined, metal fasteners that are attached to the wall. Stacked in each fastener are four pieces of Plexiglas on which a computer assisted drawing has been printed, one in each of the CMYK palette. The Plexiglass appears to be the size and shape of the screen on a Mac of the same period. *Computer Assisted Drawings...* uses new technology and speaks about new technology. As computers were entering our personal day-to-day lives, the new technology was sure to change the ways in which conceive of and create everything, including art. The work is aesthetically reminiscent of a Donald Judd, but profoundly reflects the shift from industry to technology.

It is not until one begins to look more closely at the work and read the catalog descriptions that one truly begins to understand what specifically makes all of these works Post-



Harm van den Dorpel *Assemblage (everything vs. anything)* 2013 UV print on hand-cut PETG 47 x 39 x 39 inches (120 x 100 x 100 cm)

Internet. Materiality is often the first clue as is the case for Harm van den Dorpel's *Assemblage (everything vs. anything)*. The piece is a large cut up plastic sphere hanging in space. The surfaces of the clear plastic are printed with imagery that reads as video stills or digital drawings. The images are illuminated by the ambient light of the gallery which seems to mimic the backlit glow of the computer monitor. Van den Dorpel says of his work, "I like the material object. I could just simulate everything with software but I think I need this materiality to make the thing. The [object] is made of printed textures from a stock footage material collection. I printed the materials on it but when you come close you can see that it's the actual real material, but you can also see it's still a print" (Kay, 2014). The imagery on the piece is not readily discernable but the use of appropriation and juxtaposition is clear. The curators note that van den Dorpel relies on data mining in his practice, "Pulling aesthetic referents from canonized art history, advertising and online folk art, such as the popular online website deviantART" (Archey et al. 2014). The artist's practice, being a combination of technology as material – digitally printed plastic – and technology as a source of idea



and image, is distinctly Post-Internet. It reflects “the notion that it is not the style nor the content of the works at play here, nor even their chosen medium or mediums, but rather the interconnectivity between ideas and forms, the very practice of creativity and the process by which it is realised” (Folks, 2014).

Whereas van den Dorpel’s piece presents some obvious material and visual allusions to technology and networks, *Self-Portrait (Cat Urn)* by Bunny Rogers is more cryptic.

Bunny Rogers  
*Self-Portrait  
(Cat Urn)*  
2013 Ceramic  
8 x 5 x 5  
inches (19.3  
x 11.5 x 11.5  
cm)



Nonetheless, the title immediately conjures up the pervasive selfie found in social media today. As for the object, it is precisely what the title says – an urn for the remains of a cremated cat. The urn is the instantiation of the former body itself which, in turn, is a container for a body. Still the Post-Internet connections of the work remain elusive. Curator Karen Archey sheds some light on this relationship in her talk *Bodies in Space: Identity, Sexuality, and the Abstraction of the Digital and Physical*, “Bunny Rogers came of age in a time when both television and the web capitalized on programs and sites for kids. Like many digital natives, her identity formed during the blooming mass media of the early 2000s. It could be

argued that those who grew up in this era experienced identification processes, via TV and computer screens, which introduce increasingly more distant content with which a child may uncannily identify with. Rogers has illustrated this phenomenon of elastic identity via her ‘self-portraits’ as inanimate and often lugubrious objects” (Archey, 2014). Perhaps then the cat urn is an avatar. It is an instantiation for the artist representing some part of her psychological being. In this way, as in the case of any avatar, we get insight into how Rogers may perceive or imagine herself. In addition, the catalog text adds, “This work also speaks to the aesthetics of kitsch on the internet, allowing it to circulate almost as if it were a form of personal identity” (Archey et al. 2014). Much in the way Internet users amass self-curated collections – images,



Ben Schumacher *A Seasonal Hunt for Morels* 2013 Tempered glass, hardware, inkjet on perforated vinyl, interview with Auxiliary language specialists, drain hair, positioning targets Dimensions variable

GIFs, video, music etc. they also consume products that they feel are representative of themselves. Thus, Rogers is reflecting on the impact of the digital realm on our identity both psychologically and materially.

Yet another approach is found in Ben Schumacher’s installation *A Seasonal Hunt for Morels*. The piece is an architectural arrangement of glass held together with what appears to be custom stainless steel hardware. A semi-transparent image of two women sitting at a desk is mounted on the

glass. From most perspectives, the image of the women lines up with an actual speaker/microphone, suspended from wires above, making it appear that they are engaged in an interview. An actual interview about auxiliary language emanates from the installation. The materiality is an easy connect to digital experience not only because of the digital processes needed to make the work, but also because of the reference to the computer screen. The conversation about auxiliary language is, however, a more potent nod to the complexities of language in the digital realm. Code, a basic structure of the web, is in English; code uses words and symbols, that if unfamiliar, make coding exceptionally difficult. Thus, language is a key factor in establishing a hierarchy of digital computation with English speakers at the top. In *Art in America*, David Markus describes Schumacher's work as, "digital-era bricolage. Among the seemingly incongruous materials used by the artist are Internet-sourced photographic images, readymade industrial items, pieces of vinyl, textual fragments, video screens and hair harvested from the artist's shower drain. These materials and many more are integrated into an installation that, taken together, presents a vision of the analog and ordinary acceding to the digital" (Markus, 2013). I find it fascinating how adept the artist is at integrating the real and digital worlds down to the smallest detail as even human hair is used. The exhibition catalog extends the reading of the work: "His training as an architect allows him to position installation projects in relation to the labor conditions of the knowledge economy. The sculptural use of glass panes [is] grounded in the technical language of engineering and structure and juxtaposed against the similarly engineered vocabulary of constructed language" (Archey et al., 2014).

Lastly, I would like to focus once again on the work of Kari Altmann. *R-U-In?S* is perhaps the exhibits most direct work of Post-Internet art in the exhibition. The subject matter, a collaborative website,



Kari Altmann *R-U-In?S* Ongoing Collaborative website, reading materials, performance Dimensionless

covers topics from technological innovation to ewaste to corporate branding. There are images and videos, archeological ruins and piles of trash, participator comments and philosophical quotes all arranged in a banal, seemingly disorganized website collage. It feels like the ultimate self-curated collection of images and objects speaking poignantly to the excess of data mining. In an issue of *Art Lies* Altmann's work is succinctly described, "From these continuous postings new frameworks and codes emerge, ones that trace products and images through paths of desire, exportation, and propagation. Critical memes are created and abandoned, as new directory architectures sprout up, disappear overnight, to be revisited later. The gaze of the database is below eye level, and the subterranean exchange routes between the participants remains intact, working their way through a geography of underground economies of content" (*R-U-In?S Flexible Display*, 2014). The piece traces a path that moves stealthily between the real and virtual worlds. Corporate branding mixed with ecological

activism creates confusion. But somehow the juxtaposition ekes out some meaning as it comments on our world's current state of existence. The piece reveals through its own banal presentation the insidiousness of the invisibility of technology and the effect it has on society. The World Wide Web is so much an extension of ourselves, the work suggests, that perhaps we no longer see it for what it is. The job of the Post-Internet artist is to remind us.

The Post-Internet era is still young and evolving and many factors delimit the validity and impact of this moniker. The development of digital technology and the Web has happened and continues to happen at a very fast pace. The use of individual devices has multiplied exponentially in the past decade affecting us personally and culturally. The nature of the beast confounds what's public and what's private, confuses what is an original and what is a copy, conflates production and consumption, and nearly deconstructs the boundary between the real and the virtual. New Museum curator and former editor of *Rhizome* Lauren Cornell reminds us, "Earlier notions of distinct virtual and analogue spaces have collapsed. Art is now not online only in medium-specific occasions – it is online all the time, no matter what form it takes. The art world, like the rest of the world, is only just beginning to parse the consequences of this shift" (*Beginnings + Ends*, 2014). Although the significance of the Post-Internet era is still being determined and defined in this moment, the exhibition *Art Post-Internet* made great strides in solidifying its look, methods, context, and meaning. Post-Internet is not the end of an era but, rather, a poignant marker in the continuum of art history with lasting potential.

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# **(Deaf)iant Architects: ASL Poetics and Concrete / Corporeal Spatiality in the Deaf Diaspora**

*Jewel Pereyra*

Bridging connections between avant-garde shape and pattern poetics, from Dadaism to the contemporary L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E page poets, ASL poetry resists and stretches hearing-based modalities of creative exchange and communication. Spoken word traditions, performed through call-and-response community exchanges, are crafted through rhythmic vocal intonations, word play, and musicality. Although political and subversive, slam poetry functions within a phonocentric built environment that privileges oralist and audist modalities. By contrast, ASL poetics and performances incite new understandings of kinetic, corporeal, and visual artistry, illuminating a Deaf diaspora within the United States that strives to connect Deaf artists and communities. ASL poets Peter Cook and Gilbert Eastman retell ASL poetic origins by mapping out new Deaf-centered cartographies and homelands. Moreover, documentary films such as *Sound and Fury* (2000) and *Deaf Jam* (2011) present the lived Deaf diasporas and expand on how and where Deaf communities cultivate networks in order to formulate new architectures of personhood and being. This paper traces the lineage of Deaf poetry, its innovations and limitations, and its expansion of diasporic communities by incorporating Deaf spatiality. I argue that although poetry appears to symbolize its own built environment within the constraints of form and genre, ASL poetry—as a social practice and political tool—generates new possibilities that foster Deaf corporeal subjectivities and environments in our phonocentric world.

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ASL artists such as Peter Cook and Gilbert Eastman retell ASL poetic origins by mapping out new Deaf-centered cartographies and homelands. Moreover, documentary films such as *Sound and Fury* (2000) and *Deaf Jam* (2011) present the lived Deaf diasporas and expand on how and where Deaf communities cultivate networks to formulate new architectures of personhood and being. This paper traces the expansive genealogies of Deaf poetry. Deaf poetics are innovative and enhance Diaspora studies by incorporating a Deaf-centered spatiality into our built environments. Ultimately, I argue that, although poetry appears to symbolize its own built environment within the constraints of form and genre, ASL poetry—as a social practice and political tool—generates new possibilities that foster Deaf communities in our phonocentric worlds.

## Concrete Environments and Creative Spatialities

Phonocentric spaces include schools, restaurants, transportation systems, and other social concrete environments that are built on “oralist and audist” systems that privilege oral and audial means of communication respectively (Edwards, 2006). Phonocentric environments assume oralist and audist communications as default, and are built with the “unquestioned orientation that speech and hearing are the only fully human modalities of language” (Dirksen et al., 2006). An education-based “built environment” is one where architecture firms, affiliated corporations, university systems, etc. construct classrooms that privilege students who primarily learn by speaking and listening (Dirksen et al., 2006). Thus, those who are not integrated nor able to communicate in that phonocentric environment and space are ultimately excluded.

For example, at Georgetown University, the English Department conference room contains a large oval table, windows that face only East (instead of allowing light from all sides to filter into the room), and one large TV tethered to a DVD and computer source. The room is technologically advanced and intimate in contrast to a traditional classroom setting or lecture hall that features a large white board or chalkboard and individual desks in rows facing the lecturer. During seminar discussions, learners rely on sound for instruction. Students’ facial expressions or movements are not visible to one another. Moreover, discussion is based on listening to the instructor’s lesson plans and responding to other students who are engaging in the discussion. For an ASL learner, reading facial expressions and interpreting hand and body shapes, orientation, and signed letters are crucial.

Lighting, visual class materials, space on the table, and proximity to students are all factors that affect ASL communication. In consequence, implementing these visual and spatial aspects of ASL learning is essential to understanding the sensuous complexities within our own built environments, particularly within classrooms and creative spaces.

Slam poetry contests, open mics, and author readings are other examples of phonocentric spaces. Slam poetry is a subversive form of poetry that originated in Chicago at the Get Me High Lounge in 1984. In 1988, the first slam poetry competition was organized by Bob Holman at the Nuyorican Poets Café in New York City. Since slam's inception, a boom of slam teams around the world have arisen. Most renowned is New York City's Urban Word Slam Team where hundreds of students compete for five spots on the national team each year. In Washington DC, Busboy & Poets (named after Harlem Renaissance prodigy Langston Hughes), Split This Rock, and Bloombar are creative poetry spaces that have open mic poetry nights daily. Political and resistant in the art form, slam poetry relies on intonation, musicality of the verse, word play and personal narrative. The flow and music of slam poetry, and the ability to captivate audiences by way of manipulating the English language through sound, are salient to the success of slam.

## ASL Origins and Histories

The East Coast is home to not only slam poets, but also to prominent ASL institutions, schools, scholars and poets in the United States. Formal sign education was initiated in France by Charles Michel De L'Eppe who created the first free public Deaf school in 1760 and the first French sign language dictionary in 1788. In 1817,

the first American School for the Deaf was founded by Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet in Hartford, Connecticut. Afterwards, Deaf schools were built in New York (New York Institution for the Instruction of the Deaf and Dumb in 1818), Pennsylvania, Kentucky, Missouri and Virginia between 1817-1839 ("ASL Timeline: Gallaudet University Archives", 2016). In 1864, Abraham Lincoln signed the charter for Gallaudet University and the school became the first university to offer degrees to Deaf students.

Gallaudet University's students and faculty have fought hard to secure ASL and disability rights legislation for their Deaf students. In 1988, students and faculty organized an eight-day fueled protest for a Deaf President. This initiated after the Gallaudet Board of Trustees selected a hearing faculty member, Elisabeth A. Zinser, as the university's next president. Angry students and faculty protested and shut down the campus for eight days after the decision was announced. The protesters demanded the following: "a Deaf President who could fully represent Deaf culture, the resignation of Jane Bassett Spilman, who was chair of the Board of Trustees, the representation of at least 51% Deaf members on the Board of Trustees, and non-punitive repercussions for the protesters" ("ASL Timeline: Gallaudet University Archives", 2016). As a result, Dr. I. King Jordan replaced Zinser as the first Deaf President at Gallaudet.

This rise of identity politics and the Deaf Pride movement sparked after the civil rights and feminist movements of the 1960s and 1970s. Following their lead, disability and Deaf rights activists have fought to secure their cultures and representation. For example, the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, first signed by Richard Nixon, "includes a section requiring federally funded organization to

provide teletypewriter (TTY) phones and interpreters for the Deaf” (“ASL Timeline: Gallaudet University Archives”, 2016). Following Nixon, George W.H. Bush signed the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) of 1990 that banned discrimination against persons with disabilities in the labor and work force. In 2006, a second Deaf President Now protest arose to instate Jane J. Fernandes as the new president. With the rise in the popularity of cochlear implant surgery, ASL communities are now struggling to find sustainable ways to retain their culture and heritage, that oppose the medicalization and pathologizing treatment of Deafness, in order to resist the able-bodied ideal.

## Deaf Centers and Diasporas

This Deaf genealogy demonstrates how Deaf culture is moving away from the margins and periphery and towards a Deaf Center, wherein ASL cultures and poetry incite new “cognitive, cultural and creative diversity” (Dirksen et al, 2013). This transition of a new local power transforms our contemporary spaces towards a notion of Deaf gain, which provides alternative modes of examining art production, expression and reception. Deaf gain is defined as “unique sensory orientations as forms of visual-spatial [and kinetic] language...provid[ing] opportunities to explore human character” (Dirksen et al, 2013). Deafness has both extrinsic and intrinsic values. Examples of extrinsic Deaf gains are: new fields for interpreting symbols (semiotics), enhanced spatial thought processes, and new visual grammars. Intrinsic gains include: new medias and platforms, ongoing evolution of the individual and self-advocacy (Dirksen et al, 2013). Thus, in utilizing more visual and sensorial pedagogies and interactions, mapping a “different center” for Deaf communities creates new localities and

possibilities for phonocentric environments to learn and rebuild from (Paden and Humphries, 2013). The emergence of “Deaf renaissance”, which includes films, literatures and other ASL-based art practices, provides new poetic vocabularies such as “metaphoric iconicity” and “cinematic grammar,” which are essential for understanding how ASL poetry is communicated, constructed, and practiced, especially for those who reside on the spectrum of hearing loss: “A-Little Hard-of-Hearing to Very Hard-of-Hearing” (Edwards, 2006) (Bauman and Murray, 2013) (Paden and Humphries, 2013). In understanding the implications of Deaf gain and the nuances of non-hearing communities, our phonocentric normalcies can better learn from Deaf cultures.

When developing concrete spaces for Deaf communities, wherein hearing worlds can learn to adapt to, where do ASL communicators turn to? Bauman H-Dirksen and J. Murray note that Deaf communities are “never occupying a homeland” There are no built worlds that automatically accommodate Deaf culture and, as a result, this notion of a Deaf diaspora surfaces (Bauman and Murray). In the documentary film *Sound and Fury* (2000), director Josh Aronson traces the Artinian family, specifically through the eyes of two brothers Peter (who is deaf) and Chris (who is not deaf). Within Peter’s family, his wife, young daughter Heather (a future Georgetown alumnus) and two sons are all deaf. Heather’s parents are adamant about not giving her cochlear implants. On the other hand, Chris and his hearing wife recently gave birth to a son who is deaf and they eventually decide to have a cochlear hearing implant surgical procedure performed on him. This film traces the divide between hearing and Deaf worlds within a divisive family, and the politics of exclusion and community within Deaf communities.

Heather's family eventually moves from Long Island, New York to Maryland to find a more accepting ASL community and school for their daughter. Although Peter's hearing parents and brother (Chris) can sign, they are against his decision to not provide Heather with cochlear implants and call his refusal to provide treatment as "abuse" (Aronson, 2000). Chris, also judges his decision as "criminal" (Aronson, 2000). Once Chris and his wife decide to give their newly born Deaf son the cochlear implant procedure, they see how the surgery has given their son a hearing able-body. After his son's surgery, Chris is elated and says, "Deaf culture as they know it is done" (Aronson, 2000). Since cochlear implant surgery is now a viable option for his family, Chris believes that Deafness can be treated and cured. In turn, it can provide an option for hearing families to treat their children who are born deaf. Similarly, Peter suggests that "Deaf people may become extinct" with the rise of this cochlear implants, but in resistance, he aims to cultivate a Deaf culture with his family and children (Aronson, 2000).

Through Peter's diaspora, finding community amidst difficult kinship ties resonate. Much like the queer diaspora, wherein queer folks are disowned by their families and are forced to relocate, Peter and his family migrate away from home to find more solidary within ASL-dominant spaces. Chris' impulse to secure a "normal functioning" and able-body for his son mirrors Robert McRuer and Adrienne Richs' imbricated concepts of compulsory heteronormativity and compulsory able-ness: "compulsory abled-bodiedness that produces disability is thoroughly interwoven with the system of compulsory heterosexuality that produces queerness, that—in fact—compulsory heterosexuality is contingent on compulsory abled-bodiedness and vice versa" (McRuer, 2013). Through this loss of kinship and

home, much like the queer diaspora, a Deaf diaspora in the United States emerges.

## Deaf Poet Creation Stories and Palimpsests

In mapping a Deaf homeland within this diaspora, ASL poets have produced their origin stories and myths. The poem "Let There Be Light" demonstrates a cosmic origin tale for ASL performers and signers. First, the poem starts with a box symbolizing "Limit" (Dirksen et al, 2006). The performer starts with a constraint, something that is heavy and difficult to hold. He situates it back into focus and looks through a telescope with in and out of close-up and establishing camera shots. Through the performer's "cinematic grammar" the pictures focus on the stars through the viewer's telescope lens (Dirksen et al, 2013). The twinkling stars turn into a brilliant Cosmo, which shifts into a ball that crashes down and creates Earth. Through evolution, plants begin to grow, water is present, and life begins.

This ASL "Promethean gesture," or Creation narrative through geological time, produces legends and myths that can be passed down through generations of ASL signers (Dirksen et al, 2013). In contrast to Chris's beliefs that Deaf society is "done" and heading towards extinction, ASL poetry shows us the possibilities that an ASL version of "oral histories" and "oral literature" has provided to phonocentric culture. For example, Uganda scholar Pio Zirimu notes that orature "is a way of revitalizing and valuing community stories which may include 'ritual texts, curative chants, epic poems, musical genres and folklores' ("Definitions and understandings of oral literature", 2016). Thus, this new signed version of a mythopoetics, a hybrid literary form that encompasses poetry and mythology, serves as a resistant and



political tool for displaced and marginalized communities to collect and record their origin stories by communal sharing and performance. By resisting erasure and the extinction of ASL communities and cultures, these collective stories will pass on and continue to be signed and re-envisioned for future generations.

Similarly, Gilbert Eastman's "EPIC: GALLAUDET Protest" (capitalized letters refer to the signed images translated on page) signs the beginning of his poem with "UNIVERSE EARTH U.S.A. WASHINGTON, D.C.," moving from a macrosocial sphere to the microsphere, District of Columbia, locality ("Outside & Subterranean Poetry (66): Gilbert Eastman, from 'Epic: Gallaudet Protest' (in American Sign Language)," 2016). In this poem, Eastman traces the origin of the body and history of our current political climate. He maps out the concrete spaces and American origin symbols, The Founding Fathers: "FACE-PROFILE COLUMNS LOOKED AT REFLECTION POOL / WASHINGTON MONUMENT STREET CARS / CAPITOL DOME U.S. FLAG" ("Outside & Subterranean Poetry (66): Gilbert Eastman, from 'Epic: Gallaudet Protest' (in American Sign Language)," 2016). Reading verses on the page is completely different than watching the performance live. Rather than working with written grammar structures, the capitalized words of poem of the page are written through images, rather than subject pronouns, verbs and objects. Thus, a "cinematic grammar" appears with the body, the page or template of the poem, when Eastman appears on stage. Eastman's corporeal spatiality represents the grammar and punctuation of the poem (Dirksen et al., 2013). In analyzing live ASL poetry, instead of citing poetic terms such as enjambment, caesura, anaphora, wordplay, it is essential

to observe the five components of the sign: "palm orientation, location, hand shapes, movement, and facial expressions" (Lieff, 2012). Eastman occupies a large space at the podium as he creates his origin tale of how ASL rights have transformed over history.

Furthermore, Eastman's poem demonstrates how ASL poetry, through a Deaf diaspora, can map out new visual cartographies in built environments, classrooms, neighborhoods or performance spaces, that predominantly cater to creative expression and pedagogy through hearing. Eastman's use of imagist techniques with ASL poetry enriches our ideas of expressive literary images and palimpsests. Palimpsests are literary strategies that demonstrate how earlier texts from history bare visible traces in contemporary literature and thought—our present in conversation with our past. In thinking about the body as a palimpsestic tableau or line of a poem, we realize how visual and kinetic our relationship to poetry can be, and ASL words and sign codes are re-formulated and transformed over time. These words are even overlapping within multiple historical precedence. Modernist, Beat and L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poets sought to transform the ways that we commonly envisioned what poetry is. For example, Classical, Romantic and Pastoral traditions of lyrics, sonnets and other forms privileged aesthetics of sound within their poetry. In contrast, as Michael Davidson asserts, ASL poetry concerns the merging of the mind (or spiritual), the body and cinematic mind, that modernist figures, Walt Whitman, Ezra Pound, T.S. Eliot, Louis Zukofsky and Gertrude Stein, experimented with to form new ontological reinterpretations of the visual body, the poetic self, and the "relationships between sign and object" (Davidson, 2012). By studying ASL, as a marker of how our visual and object-sign languages can change over

time, we can expand how we can express our artistic selves through mediums that do not privilege aural or oral modes of communication.

*Sins Invalid: An Unashamed Claim to Beauty*, a disabilities-centered performance show in San Francisco, is an example of a queer and radical arts space that defies normalized views of disability and able-bodiedness. Deaf dancer Antoine Hunter's piece proves that the reconciliation of the internal self, with the outer self, is the affirmation that transcends definitions of Deafness and phonocentric space. Through a mixed contemporary dance and poetry performance, Hunter conveys that rhythmic alignment does not solely rely on the syncing of hearing. Before his performance begins, the introducer recites:

"Some assume people with disabilities have 'extra senses' – a sixth sense to negotiate the world. No. All beings have multiple and phenomenal senses. All beings struggle. Deaf or hard of hearing dancers do not have an extra sense to feel vibration out of the air. Movers or dancers who are deaf or hard of hearing take a risk in moving or dancing, often without knowing the sounds around them" (Berne and Moore, 2006).

As the piece progresses, Hunter pirouettes to a spoken word piece about the Tuskegee Syphilis Experiment, a forty-year long clinical study (1932-1972), wherein doctors and researchers treated Blacks with syphilis to experiment and draw conclusions on the effects of untreated syphilis. Although the doctors and researchers knew about, and had access to the cure for syphilis (penicillin), many of the research subjects were not treated, rendering those bodies as permanently disabled. Hunter's sway and vibrations artfully display that union of body

with the physical space. Thus, the movements and expression result from the interior self—or "internal meter"—that moves with the music in a synced relationship that is not commanding or dependent on one another (Berne and Moore, 2006). In coordination with the overtly racist Tuskegee experiment echoing in the background, this subversive piece signifies and artfully destroys the medical, industrial and racist experiments on Black disabled bodies.

## Deaf Slam Poets in Contemporary New York City

Judy Lief's *Deaf Jam* (2011) explores more recent ASL poetry diasporic communities in New York City as she documents the first ASL high school slam poet team who competes at the Urban World and Nuyorican Café slam poetry competitions. This documentary captures a bildungsroman story of Aneta Brodski, a Deaf teenage who grows up in Queens, New York City. Aneta was born in Israel and migrated to Russia then to New York where she attends the Lexington School for the Deaf. The Lexington School for the Deaf was built in 1867 and is one of the first K-12 schools for Deaf students in the United States. According to the film, "52% of Deaf children learn speech, 36% learn sign with speech and 11% learn sign only" (Lief, 2011). Thus, even at one of the U.S.'s oldest and most famous Deaf school, oral modalities of learning and communicating are demanded of Deaf students to this day. Aneta first learns about ASL poetry in an afterschool program, and through various poetry workshops with poet Peter Cook and scholar H-Dirksen Bauman, she strives to find a unique ASL poetic voice. The ASL slam poetry club will be the first group to compete for a spot as a member of the Urban World NYC slam team. This film articulates Aneta's journey towards finding a

creative ASL voice within the spoken word and poetic built environments that do not fully comprehend Deaf poetry.

One of Aneta's first poems is about her own birth and her own coming of age narratives. She signs a narrative about the biological processes of reproduction and how she came to be. This origin tale is another vehicle through which to explore the mode of connection and relation within the ASL communities. Aneta first performs this piece with her teammates at an ASL Poetry Performance where 350 Deaf students from all over NYC attend. The ASL team's instructors encourage the students to not spell out their poetry by hand, but rather to think only in pictures—cinematic images. Peter Cook signs, "No words, just images!" to Aneta through a Skype call as she constructs her poem. Eventually, Aneta performs at the Nuyorican Poets Café, which was founded in 1973 by Miguel Algarin. The Nuyorican Poets Café is a "multicultural and multi-arts institution" that "gives voice to a diverse group of rising poets, actors, filmmakers and musicians... Allen Ginsberg called the Café 'the most integrated place on the planet'" ("History and Awards: Nuyorican Poets Café", 2016). Thus, in signing the first ASL poem at Nuyorican, Aneta conveys a new visual communication and art to the Nuyorican space. When Aneta performs, her translator announces that there will be no audible translation. Instead, she asks the audience to focus on the pictures of her images that are not oral, but instead in the same imagist language that she experiences daily. The reception from her audience is minimal, and although Aneta brings something new to the diverse space, the boundaries of misunderstanding between the hearing and Deaf worlds remain.

In melding those boundaries together, Aneta meets Tahani, a hearing Palestinian

American spoken word poet, who attends Columbia University and works with Urban Word. The two poets team up to write a spoken word/ASL poetry collaboration piece that merges both spoken word and ASL languages. In articulating both their own diasporas, Israel and Palestine, and their personal experienced differences between the hearing world vs. Deaf world, both poets contest phonocentric spaces and the broader nation-state conflicts and war between Israel and Palestine. Aneta, subsequently, does not have American citizenship and she performs "My family has been waiting for the immigration papers to come through for over ten years" (Lieff, 2011). The two collide both diasporas together to resist the violence that has arisen among multiple worlds: Deaf vs. hearing, Israel vs. Palestine, and the migration from a distant homeland to the United States. The pair performs Columbia University, Baltimore, Maryland and other venues across the United States before performing at Bob Holman's Bowery Poetry Club, a famous performance space for poets located in Manhattan. *Deaf Jam* illustrates that ASL poetry is becoming a new force within slam poetry spaces, and there is much needed intercultural education and pivotal growth that can enrich our creative, communicative and educational worlds.

## ASL Poetry's Limitations and Risks

Although promoting ASL poetry in public spaces is ideal for visibility, culture and community in the microsocial and global world, marketing ASL as an aesthetic can be problematic in many artistic circles. For example, in Washington, DC, Busboy & Poets on 5th and K, features ASL poetry open mics every third Friday of each month. However, many of these performances are ASL translations of songs such as Whitney Houston's "The Greatest Love of All," Michael Jackson's "The Way You

Make Me Feel,” and Macklemore’s “Same Love.” Though the artists (predominantly hearing) intend to promote the visibility of sign language and culture, there is a line of caricature and mimicry that diminishes the quality of Deaf-centered poetry. This stanches the creative possibilities of ASL poetry, as a subversive social practice, to materialize.

If ASL open mics are essentially translations of popular songs, then the image of ASL is that of translation of/for the hearing world, and not of its own generative, community-based and political capacities—the new kinetic, corporeal and imagist palimpsests and origins stories that Peter Cook, Gilbert Eastman, Aneta Brodski and other ASL poets strive to achieve. Moreover, celebrities such as Johnny Depp and Natalie Portman’s sign language translations of Paul McCartney’s “My Valentine” music video (over ten million views) and Ed Sheeran’s “You Need Me, I Don’t Need You” music video (over forty million views) market and capitalize on the aesthetics of ASL for its “trendy and cool” and “new and exotic” appeal for mainstream audiences, rather than for ASL poetry’s subversive content and community-driven purposes. Thus, for an ASL poetics to manifest, support for lived Deaf poetic and embodied experience is crucial for the longevity of an authentic ASL voice.

## Conclusion

Today, artists are creating new journals and mapping out their own intersections of what constitutes as Deaf and disabilities cultures. For example, radical journals such as *The Deaf Poets Society: An Online Journal of Deaf and Disabled Literature* seek to “create a literature of a society with a different center...to incubate and amplify the literature of the movement that fights

back against bigoted policies of sterilization and the racist, classist pseudoscience of eugenics” (“The Deaf Poets Society Manifesto”, 2016). Although not all the included writers are Deaf in this journal, *The Deaf Poets Society* hopes to incite and display a cultural consciousness that is against the obliteration of Deaf and disabled cultures and communities. Thus, the journal’s “aim is to always be accessible to every reader... who understands the difficulty of managing physical pain...the literature of the recovery rooms, the psych ward, the hospice” (“The Deaf Poets Society Manifesto”, 2016). By mapping out spaces for Deaf and disabled communities to connect to online and elsewhere, new imagined worlds for ASL poetry and shared community is possible.

By examining ASL poetry through its concrete and corporeal spatialities and cultural histories, more analyses of ASL and built spaces are required to understand more about Deaf culture and its creative worlds, not only in the United States but globally. The destruction and un-mappings of Deaf culture destroy the possibility of understanding new kinds of diaspora and migration in the United States: a country built by the hands of immigrants. Thus, by locating and examining how communities are moving away from oralist and audist modes of communication institutions, and architectures, educators and artists can imagine and implement new worlds that are more interconnected and consciously constructed through visual and kinetic modalities, and through languages that are more intercultural, imagist and corporeal. Simultaneously, by viewing the body as its own cinematic and corporeal grammar, new worlds of poetry and its social practices can emerge.



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# Can Science Fiction Alter the Future?

*Tara Jabbari*

What are the ethical ramifications and uses of technology? How can we know the dangers of using certain technologies when they do not exist or at least not at the moment? Science fiction reveals the possibilities of what technology can offer: the good, the bad and the ugly. Through an examination of select works, this paper analyzes how science fiction comments on the well-intentioned uses for technological services, while showing the worst-case scenarios that may result because of their existence. This argument is supported by a working communication theory to explain current technology use and the problems that arise from it. With a combination of educating oneself about technology and keeping in mind science fiction works such as these, the prevention of bad results from future technology advancements and uses is possible.

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The arts have been known as an outlet to express our desires, worries, and dreams. From love stories to war epics, there has always been a ring of truth to the arts, no matter how small. Science fiction has been able to bring very real subjects into discussion in an unreal setting. Literature and media in science fiction shed light on major issues of the time. *The Twilight Zone*, a show that started in the 1960s, tackled issues from racism to nuclear war. The creator of *Black Mirror* comments that the biggest issue of today is arguably the growth of technology and current science fiction works reflect that (Brooker 2011). Focusing on these and other works of modern science fiction, this paper will investigate how these worlds, which take place in a not too distant future, portray the abuse of technology in society. Using several communication theories, this paper also discusses how science fiction can be an outlet for preventive measures against such technological abuses from happening.

## Where We Are Now

Technology has evolved fast and is continuing to progress in features and capabilities. Take cell phones as an example: they started as just portable phones that led to texting, to getting the Internet, to having cameras. Users are trying to keep up with these changes in technologies, which are escalating. The danger is that, “we face an ever-widening responsibility gap, which, if not addressed properly, poses a threat to both the consistency of the moral framework of society and the foundation of the liability concept in law,” (Matthias, 2004). Learning how to use and be responsible with the growing advancements and needs of technology is paramount. The abuse of technology in the wrong hands can create chaos. From a standpoint of national security, personal information being accessed

or shared without consent has been notably addressed in our news (Thomas T., 2015). Educating more people on the services and effects of technology can help prevent the wrongful use of it.

How can we be sure that education in technology can protect us from dangers such as theft, abuse, or invasive activity? Looking at science fiction works can help society keep in mind the insights from worst-case scenarios. “Science fiction offers us the possibility to speculate about the possible outcomes of current developments. Even if these speculations are highly fantastical at times, they can nevertheless highlight the moral questions inherent in these possible developments,” (Magerstädt, 2014). Many creators of science fiction work keep reality in mind, as Charlie Brooker explains on his critically acclaimed series, *Black Mirror*, “each episode has a different cast, a different setting, even a different reality. But they're all about the way we live now – and the way we might be living in 10 minutes' time if we're clumsy. And if there's one thing we know about mankind, it's this: we're usually clumsy,” (Brooker, 2011). Most of the episodes revolve around characters abusing technology and having to deal with the consequences.

## Abuse of Technology

When speaking of science fiction works, discussions center on ethical dilemmas, specifically the good and bad sides to new technology. In 1995, the film *Strange Days*, taking place days before the new millennium, introduces a new fictional technology called SQUID, where a person wears a helmet-like device that allows them to see, hear, and feel what another person is doing. The main character not only abuses SQUID, using it for his own selfish benefits to relive memories, but also illegally

sells the technology to seedy customers. The technology becomes an addiction for many—a new drug. The film escalates with the appearance of another character that uses SQUID to make people see what it is like to rape and murder someone. Using the same technology that allows the person to experience killing someone also allows them to solve cases as to who committed the murders. Without SQUID, they wouldn't have been able to figure out who were the rapists and murderers. At the same time, if SQUID was not invented, those acts wouldn't have happened to those specific victims because of their connection to the technology. This film is a great example of both the beneficial and the negative outcomes that may result from using a new technology.

## Security

As much as technology has simplify our lives, it has also put us our personal lives in the public eye. For example, the GPS system offered on our cell phones allows us to find out what is near us. At the same time, we can be found easily by anyone and this opens up to dangerous repercussions. The 2013 novel *The Circle*,<sup>1</sup> touches on security and safety issues. The setting is an eerily similar Silicon Valley like lifestyle where a young woman, Mae starts to work for the biggest and most powerful technology company known as The Circle. There is a section where the characters discuss the uses of tracker chips implanted into children's arms. In this fictional world, The Circle has implanted a GPS chip into a baby's arms once they are born. When a group of children go missing, the authorities and parents look for them using this chip. However, they find out that the kidnapper or kidnappers had cut off the arms of the children and scattered them

around so that the authorities would be wasting time chasing around severed arms. The conclusion by the technology company came to was to start a service that would implant the chip to the bone of the children. Mae tries to bring notice to an ethical dilemma of such a service that has proved the worst case scenario does not solve the problem of finding missing children but no one listens to her. The novel quickly moves on leaving the reader with an unsettling feeling that the companies still only think about the good uses of technology, not thinking much of the repercussions.

This fictional, near future GPS tracking system on children is not all too far-fetched. We already have trackers on our pets. Then there are our smartphones and geo-tagging, which allows geographical metadata to most of our applications, videos and photos. This feature has risked people's lives, most notably in domestic violent situations that shelters make it protocol to take out batteries so that abusers cannot track their victims at the shelter. Potential stalkers and thieves track our whereabouts as they plan their attack by checking our social media posts and finding the geo-tag. There are steps to help prevent this from happening. Checking each app on our phone and turning off the location service is one step. Another idea is to post pictures from an event or vacation after so that people won't know where you are at that moment (Siciliano, 2012).

## Past, Present, & Future

In the past, science fiction has represented an outlet to speak about real world problems but in a fictional somewhat futuristic setting. *The Twilight Zone*, for example, spoke of real world issues such as space explorations and government exploitation or control.

<sup>1</sup> *The Circle* is due to become a major motion picture, scheduled for release sometime in 2017. It is being produced by Tom Hanks who also stars in the film along with Emma Watson.

“(Rod) Serling, a brilliant writer, created *The Twilight Zone* because he was tired of having his provocative teleplays about contemporary issues routinely censored in order to appease corporate sponsors. If he wrote about racism in a southern town, he had to fight the network over every line. But if he wrote about a metaphorical, quasi fictional world – suddenly he could say everything he wanted,” (Brooker, 2011). While the world has changed a lot since the 1950s and 60s, Brooker thought that if *The Twilight Zone* started today, it would concentrate more on the relationship between people and technology and how this relationship would affect privacy, media, and entertainment (Brooker, 2011).

These works set in near future worlds where technology is used for continuous reasons is arguably predicting the future and the problem with that is we can't predict the future. However, we can look at the past and see if there can be a possible correlation, “(science fiction) is about the shadow that the future casts upon the present. It shows us how profoundly we are *haunted* by the ghosts of what has not yet happened,” (Shaviro, 2003). It has been compared to philosophy, where there is no certain reasoning or conclusion but both can keep a person in tune with the possibilities that can result of certain actions.

## **Black Mirror**

*Black Mirror*, which has drawn comparisons to *Twilight Zone*, brings a futuristic yet realistic world of what it means for the abuse of technology in several societal matters such as a new justice system or how to record and keep track of our memories, (Brooker, 2011). As Brooker explains about the third episode, “The Entire History of You,” “...what if you had a kind of Sky Plus system for your head, so you could rewind

and replay memories at will? You'd never forget where you left your keys again, for one thing. And it would be great for winning arguments. But it might not be brilliant news for the health of your relationship. After all, how much do you actually want to know about each other?” (Brooker, 2011). Early on in this episode, there is a scene in an airport where security can view your chip to see exactly what you were doing. This could be argued as a positive to having such a technology, making it harder to hide your intentions of breaking the law or planning a terrorist attack. Later on, a character is introduced who was attacked so that they can remove her chip to steal her identity. This shows a dangerous and life threatening aspect of having this fictional technology.

Does it hurt us more to have every little thing about our lives recorded and stored? This brings about the main storyline of the episode where a husband becomes obsessed to find out if his wife is having an affair. He rewinds memories of seeing her with the man he believes is her lover, he stalks the other man, eventually attacking him and forcefully deletes memories of his wife from this man's chip. However, without this we still have our memories, that cannot be taken away from us so the attempts of the husband to erase all memory of his wife from this man's memories remain futile.

## **Multicommunicating**

Technological development and implementation has always been connected to both positive and negative outcomes. The works above show some dangers of using technologies everyday. To keep in mind of everyday real life technology use and its repercussions, we can take a look at a new communication theory called multicommunicating. This theory is defined as, "engaging in

two or more overlapping, synchronous conversations," ("Multicommunicating," 2016). A current study being conducted on multicommunicating looks into all the issues that have come up with how often people can be reached through the vast number of communication tools. CEOs to teenagers and everyone in between can be connected to their professional and personal obligations all day, every day. Several cases explain that while in a meeting, a person also is texting with their significant about dinner. However, there are questions and concerns that arise if multicommunicating make these conversations more successful because people can do them at the same time. While this theory is still being studied and yet not published, there are findings that show it does depend on if a person is communicating with three or more conversations being not as successful as having just two at the same time. One subject for an interview explains, "I work from home, married and have four kids. Multicommunicating and budgeting is an everyday, almost all day occurrence. But when it comes to three or more conversations and platforms, the harder it is to be able to communicate with each and every one," (Jabbari, 2016).

Another problem that arises is the pressure to get back to people right away otherwise, the perceptions of the person they are trying to reach is altered into a negative connotation. "Sometimes when I receive a text and I am not ready to respond, I used to be able to take some time to get back with that person and wait until I was ready. Now, with the visibility of social media, it means I can't update my Facebook page. Then the person is thinking, she has time to update her Facebook page but doesn't have time to respond to my text? What is going on?" (Tuner, 2016). These examples show that while through technology and multicommunicating, we can get a lot more

done and stay in touch with people faster, there are still a lot of drawbacks.

The accessibility and the various ways for people to communicate with each other and about themselves has also become a central argument that narcissism and the want for immediate acceptance has reprioritize our standards and needs. "With the television image - the television being the ultimate and perfect object for this new era - our own body and the whole surrounding universe become a control screen," (Baudrillard, 1988). For the series, *Black Mirror*, the title came about because it is referring to, "the effect of a TV or a computer screen when switched off, giving a dark reflection of the onlooker," (Black Mirror, 2011). For instance, in the "The Entire History of You," episode, the characters use their chips to over analyze everything of another person's mannerisms. However, a lot of things are going on in a person's mind and life as one psychology paper points out, "each one of us is, essentially, a bundle of memories and related psychological states-beliefs, thoughts, emotions, hopes, fears," (Rowlands, 2004). While the main character thinks that during a job interview, the employers are all judging him, they could be thinking of something else entirely. We cannot read each other's minds. To try and analyze why someone does something at a certain time to the point of scrutiny will not bring many answers, only frustrations and second guessing everyone's intentions. Experts recommend steps to give us space from the grasp of technology. Having a meal with no technology around, such as being at a party and putting our phones in a different room. These steps can help bring perspective on how technology is here to help us. It is not there to take over our lives and we have a say in what controls us, (Turkle, 2015).



## Our Online Persona

Another example of how we portray ourselves or are portrayed by others online distorts the reality of human beings is the episode, “Be Right Back.” In this story, a widow, Martha uses her late partner Ash’s emails, social media profiles and other digital data to bring him back in the form of a clone. In the beginning, the clone looks, speaks, and acts like her partner pretty convincingly. However, she learns that Ash is not back and that she has to really deal with grief. It sounds like this is a mandatory part of life, grieving the loss of a loved one but the episode touches on how our imprints, especially digital imprints are not what makes up a person. One side argues that when we take our memories and put them into a clone or even online, the idea is that we still continue living (Rowlands, 2004). However, there is the fundamental issue that people continuously change, that we cannot be just one type; we are more complicated than a computer system. To have ourselves be cloned into a digital format does not allow us to live forever and certainly does not represent who we are 100%. In the episode, the clone acts contrary to things that the deceased confided to Martha before he died. A seemingly happy photograph really was a sad day for him or a song comes on that no one would have guessed Ash would like because it seems so unlike him, he never shared this guilty pleasure online. As one review article humorously explains, “Obviously bringing your dead boyfriend back to life with his past tweets is not the healthiest route to recovery, and Martha learns this the hard way,” (Maloney, 2015). Taking a hard subject such as grief and using it to expand technology is not the ethical or correct way of progressing society, at least not in the attempts made in *Black Mirror*.

The common practice of sharing our thoughts and daily actions on social media or anywhere online has gone on overload, “...all the useless information that comes to you from the entire world, like a microscopic pornography of the universe, useless, excessive, just like the sexual close-up in a porno film,” (Baudrillard, 1988). So how much information is needed and how much is just noise? Do we need to know what people’s thoughts are on this week’s episode of any popular show? Do we need to follow a trip someone is taking from the time they leave until they come back from vacation? It can be all too much and mistaken that it is needed when it is not a necessity to know about another person’s thoughts and occurrences. In *The Circle*, the employees and willing participants start to wear a camera on themselves all day to share with the world their lives. It begins with having politicians doing this to show they are not hiding anything and that they are trying to get bills passed and policies changed. “The company demands transparency in all things; two of its many slogans are SECRETS ARE LIES and PRIVACY IS THEFT. Anonymity is banished; everyone’s past is revealed; every one’s present may be broadcast live in video and sound. Nothing recorded will ever be erased,” (Ullman, 2013). During the course of the novel, we follow the rise of Mae and the ethically questionable company. She feels the pressure and becomes obsessed with letting everyone online know what and how she is doing something and with whom. The repercussions for her and those around her move from annoyance to paranoia to lethal.

### *The Circle's Symbolism*

The novel uses particular names and references that speak to real life occurrences. We will look at how writer, David Eggers used these symbolic moments and names to foreshadow the danger of what can happen

when you let technology take over your life. *The Circle* is analyzed by Margaret Atwood who theorizes the meanings of the names of main characters and some of the technologies invented at the company. Everyone working for *The Circle* has a username for his or her work profile; Mae is given the username, “MaeDay,” jokingly compared to a war holiday. “There is no real war holiday called MaeDay, but “Mayday”—from the French *m’aidez*—is a venerable distress signal,” (Atwood, 2013). This distress signal was used in real life during times of war and was satirized in George Orwell’s *1984*. In this novel, it is used once again as a reference that danger is coming. Another character’s name is Tyler Alexander Gospodinov, an inventor for the company that starts a system called TruYou, which takes away the need for passwords and its attempts are to stop fake identities from being made. His goal is to bring about simplicity and more transparency online. As Atwood notices, his middle name is Alexander, possibly a connection to Alexander the Great who ended up ruling most of the world, more than anyone else had done.

Symbolism is huge in the novel, with the founders of the company referred to as “the Gang of Forty.” Atwood points out, the number forty is known in several scriptures and histories as a period of tests and trials. In the Old Testament, Noah’s flood lasts for forty days and nights, Moses spent forty years in the wilderness while in the New Testament, Jesus fasted for forty days, (Atwood, 2013). All of these were high stakes life and death situations. In the novel, the characters are continuously tested and not just their reputations are threatened but their lives are as well. The buildings of *The Circle* are made of glass, a nod to the continued idea of transparency and the lack of secrecy and privacy. While the idea of using the symbol, a circle to be the

company’s name and logo can be a nod to real life company Google, it is also theorized of its connection to the circles many historic symbolism. In Egyptian tradition, the circle is representing the sun, the divine encompassing endless light. In the novel, it says, “A circle is the strongest shape in the universe. Nothing can beat it, nothing can improve upon it, nothing can be more perfect. And that’s what we want to be: perfect,” (Atwood, 2013). All these symbols are planned to show how much danger the characters and the company are to one another through the overuse of technology.

## Being Invasive

In the novel as well as in real life, arguably, the common practice of sharing has become obscene. “Obscenity begins precisely when there is no more spectacle, no more scene, when all becomes transparency and immediate visibility, when everything is exposed to the harsh and inexorable light of information and communication,” (Baudrillard, 1988). This discussion of invasiveness ties back to “Our Online Persona” section in this paper as well. What used to be considered obscene meant a sexual perversion or what is hidden and not talked about other than behind closed doors. With the use of technology and communication tools associated with it, “...it is the obscenity of the visible, of the all-too-visible, of the more-visible-than-the-visible. It is the obscenity of what no longer has any secret, of what dissolves completely in information and communication” (Baudrillard, 1988). How much of this continuous information is retained? How much is actually useful? Today, we can share our daily lives and feelings through numerous technology services, such as social media or emailing. In *The Circle*, they take it a step further to have politicians wear personal cameras to show their activities then soon made most of the



employees at *The Circle* do the same. Despite several people close to the main character, Mae continues to participate and actually care about how many people comment, watch and like her daily activities. This isn't too far-fetched, many companies and individual people want their content to be found and engaged with. They experiment with how to get their gratification, for instance posting a video then a photo to see what gets more notice. *The Circle* is not too far off on the idea of how often and what we share online, "What happens to us if we must be "on" all the time? Then we're in the twenty-four-hour glare of the supervised prison. To live entirely in public is a form of solitary confinement," (Atwood, 2013). Mae loses her family, her friends in order to gain a higher status for *The Circle* and among the internet. This is all due to the fact that she took the company's belief in transparency to its highest and most dangerous level.

## Not Letting Technology Run Our Lives

Charlie Brooker asked simply, "If technology is a drug – and it does feel like a drug – then what, precisely, are the side-effects?" (Brooker, 2011). His series as well as Dave Eggers' *The Circle* explain a worst-case scenario of side effects. In *Black Mirror*, technology companies and services take over people's priorities such as logging all of your actions and memories or bringing back your dead loved ones in the form of clones. Brooker elaborates on how much we depend on technology, "It's hard to think of a single human function that technology hasn't somehow altered, apart perhaps from burping. That's pretty much all we have left. Just yesterday I read a news story about a new video game installed above urinals to stop patrons getting bored: you control it by sloshing your urine stream left and right," (Brooker, 2011). The absurdity of

being entertained constantly, even when you need to take a couple of minutes to relieve yourself is showing how much technology has overtaken our daily lives.

While technology and tech companies continue to grow in demand and bring more and more services, that does not mean that we, the public just sit back helplessly and let them take over. "...It is ultimately up to the community as a whole, through public scrutiny and debate, to keep watch over science and technology, and to decide what direction they should take" (Magerstädt, 2014). The power of science fiction can bring about awareness for issues that might not plague us, yet. That is how Brooker and Eggers shared their worries and thoughts, they don't think we are too off from living a life of being fully surveilled and forever digitized but that doesn't mean it will happen. Their works have brought about important questions that require people to really look into their lives and their priorities. Technology has helped the world vastly, from allowing people to communicate from all over the world to medical technologies that have saved people's lives. At the same time, it is believed that technology has taken too much from us, or rather, that we let it take away from us, (Thomas T., 2015).

Predicting the future is impossible but preventing misuse of technological services is not. What have *Black Mirror* and been able to make us think about? What have some recent communication theory studies found? While there are more examples and aspects to them, a few were discussed here. Sharing every action and thought can be seen as obscene and narcissistic. What we put online doesn't truly represent who we are as individuals. Being able to communicate with people at any moment can be a hassle to be able to concentrate on just one thing.

and keeping everything that has happened to us is not a necessity in life. We need to step away from technology, reflect on what is and what is not a priority. A conscious effort to take a break from technology, even for just a short time a day helps. The growth of technology is only making things more possible. Science fiction has brought about questions and thoughts on how, if we are not careful, technology can take over and we will lose control of ourselves. There are preventative measures from abusing it and threaten our livelihoods. Educating ourselves on the uses of technology or banning cell phones during family meals are small steps to protect us. It is not too late to for people to use advancements in technology to continue the progressiveness of humanity, we just need to be careful.

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# The 'Nirbhaya' Movement: An Indian Feminist Revolution

*Garima Bakshi*

In December 2012, New Delhi witnessed a horrific crime – a female medical student was violently gang-raped on a moving bus and then dumped onto the highway, injured and unconscious. While she didn't survive the attack, Nirbhaya, as she was named by the media, sparked a revolution in India and its neighboring countries. This paper delves into the many aspects of the movement, examining it as a whole by drawing on the theories of Castells, Jenkins, Papacharissi, and Sundaram. It examines the protests that took place on digital forums which then transcended onto the streets, the affective nature of the movement, and international responses it elicited.

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On the night of December 16, 2012, medical student Jyoti Singh and her friend Avanimdra Pandey, looking for transportation home, boarded a private bus in South Delhi. Immediately after the four other men in the bus turned off the lights and snatched Singh's and Pandey's phones. They beat them up with iron rods, leaving Pandey half-unconscious ("Delhi Gangrape Victims Friend Relives the Horrifying 84 Minutes of December 16 Night", 2017). They brutally gang-raped Singh, inserting an iron rod into her genitals, and then threw both of them off of the bus onto the main road ("Delhi Gangrape Victims Friend Relives the Horrifying 84 Minutes of December 16 Night", 2017). A highway patrol van picked them up and took them to a hospital; Avanimdra Pandey survived, but Jyoti Singh died on December 29 in a hospital in Singapore, where she was flown for treatment ("Delhi Gangrape Victims Friend Relives the Horrifying 84 Minutes of December 16 Night", 2017). After news of the crime broke, it sparked anger, disgust, shame, and horror across the world. The media named Jyoti Singh 'Nirbhaya', meaning 'the fearless one'; the movement that followed also came to be known by the same moniker. This paper aims to analyze the December 16 Delhi gang-rape case as a movement, by examining three of its aspects- first, its comparison it to the Arab Spring and Occupy Wall Street; second, its affective side as a digital media movement; and lastly, the international coverage of the movement.

This case, in many ways, was the tipping point for an urban population in the capital that had been dealing with rising crimes, corruption, and inadequate security for more than a decade (Sundaram, 2009). It incited raw emotions of anger and dissent at the State and Central governments, and the police forces. Thousands of civilian

protestors took to candlelight vigils and peaceful demonstrations at India Gate, eventually leading to a change in criminal laws, and the setting up of a fast track court to prosecute the attackers (Harris and Kumar, 2015).

The outrage that followed the attack opened up a previously nonexistent space for victims and those close to them to speak out against sexual violence. Following the protests, there was a remarkable increase in the number of rapes being reported annually, indicating that survivors of sexual assault were more willing to report it than before ("Frightening and heartening', Rape Cases Skyrocket in Post-December 16 Delhi," 2013). In 2011, there were 572 rape cases reported in Delhi. The number rose to 706 in 2012, more than doubled to 1,441 in 2013, and increased to 1,813 in 2014 (Pandey et al, 2013) ("Delhi is Now India's Rape Capital, Show NCRB Data", 2015). "What was novel about Nirbhaya was the nationwide as well as international attention it received in the new age of social media, compelling politicians and civil society alike to deliberate over a previously underreported issue", writes Heba Adawy in *The Spark Of 'Nirbhaya': Indian Feminist Interventions, Common Challenges And Prospects* (2014). The heinous nature of Singh's rape, its urban and supposedly safe setting, and the indifferent attitudes of the authorities held responsible led to the voicing of demands for a structural change in the way that rape is perceived. The movement demanded that sexual violence be seen as an affront to a woman's autonomy, and as stripping her of her rightful agency, in opposition to the commonly held patriarchal perception of rape as a dishonor to the victim's family.

Nivedita Menon in her book *Seeing Like a Feminist* points out the distinction between how rape is viewed by patriarchal forces and

feminists. "For patriarchal forces, rape is evil because it is a crime against the honor of the family, whereas feminists denounce rape because it is a crime against the autonomy and bodily integrity of a woman. This difference in understanding rape naturally leads to diametrically opposite proposals for fighting rape" (Menon, 2012). In the patriarchal framework, the victim is responsible for her rape, because either she stepped outside the prescribed female bounds of the private into the public or she didn't dress like a traditional woman should, hence tempting the rapist. In such environments, where rape is seen to be the fault of the victim rather than the rapist, women often choose not to report the crime, and stay silent instead (Menon, 2012).

### India's Arab Spring

Often hailed as India's Arab Spring, the 'Nirbhaya' case was marked by unprecedented public outrage on social media as well as on the ground ("Is This the Start of India's 'Arab spring'?", 2013). The protesters had several demands that battled against insufficient and incompetent security; inadequate and unreliable public transport; an insensitive police force that often blamed rape victims for the crime inflicted upon them; and bureaucracy and red tape surrounding sexual assault and rape cases. The intensity of these protests led an otherwise lackadaisical government to implement certain changes. Justice Verma was appointed chairperson of a committee tasked with the reformation of the anti-rape law. More female officers were added to Delhi's police force; security was tightened and night patrolling was increased; the police now had to undergo gender sensitization courses; six fast track courts were set up to specifically deal with rape cases; laws against sexual assault were made stricter; and, since one of the accused was seventeen years old at the time of the

crime, a debate for changing juvenile laws had opened up. Most importantly, a space for public discussion of sexual violence that had not existed before was created.

Similar to USA's 2011 movement Occupy Wall Street the Nirbhaya movement in Delhi was also a leaderless movement with a decentralized structure, comprising of a networked community (Castells, 2012). While the Occupy movement targeted unfair capitalist practices and "set out to occupy Wall Street, the key node of the global networks of financial domination of the world", the Delhi movement mainly targeted a deep seated cultural acceptance of sexual violence against women (Castells, 2012). Manuel Castells, in *Networks of Outrage and Hope: Social Movements in the Internet Age*, explores the roles that social media platforms like Twitter, and Tumblr played in organizing and planning protests and the occupation of public spaces in the Occupy movement. He describes the advent of social media as leading to a participatory culture, since the public visibility of tweets and Tumblr posts enable a many-to-many model, increasing visibility and contribution. Since these networks are horizontal in structure, they are also more independent from state regimes than traditional media like television and radio, providing spaces for criticizing political powers and governmental authorities. Hence, for Castells, social media plays a crucial role in mobilizing the masses, cultivating enhanced levels of participation. It also helps in the dissemination of information that traditional news media wouldn't report, like, for example, the police tear gassing peaceful protesters. Like in the Delhi December 2012 protests, "Communication networks were the blood vessels of the Occupy movement" (Castells, 2012). Both movements united people across political ideologies and classes, and both faced "violence against a non-violent



movement” at the hands of the police and other state security forces (Castells, 2012).

But, as Castells writes, the Occupy movement’s “fundamental achievement has been to rekindle hope that another life is possible” (Castells, 2012). Bad weather conditions and clashes with the police resulted in many abandoning the movement altogether, raising the question of whether the movement was built to last. While the achievements of the anti-sexual violence protests in Delhi still leave a lot to be desired in terms of a cultural change, they did translate to tangible legal changes. As Anthony Alessandrini points out in *Revolutionary Egypt: Connecting Domestic and International Struggles*, unlike the Arab Spring movements, the Occupy movement had neither the temporality nor the physical labor required for it to sustain itself and result in actual change (Alessandrini, 2015). The Delhi movement had both the temporality and the physicality required; smaller and less publicized rape cases had been in public visibility for years, brewing public dissent. Numerous scams by the government, as well as high crime rates and poor infrastructure had given rise to several smaller protests in the months preceding 2012. So, while the most publicized and remarkable feature of the Occupy movement was the role of the middle class in activating a powerful civil society, the Delhi movement saw not just the networked middle class communities, but also the poor lower classes and slum dwellers, who were all fighting a battle in the war against sexual violence.

Castells' approach towards the importance of social media tends to overemphasize the role of the Internet, and subvert the long years of social and political unrest, and state corruption that the public tolerated. However, Castells doesn't get swept away by a technologically deterministic approach;

he concedes that social media alone isn't enough, and that “a hybrid networked movement that links cyberspace and urban space in multiple forms of communication.” is required (Castells, 2012). The use of online spaces to channel energies onto physical spaces is what distinguishes new ‘social media movements’ from the traditional form of protest.

## A Digital Movement

Like in Occupy Wall Street, online spaces were used to channel potentials onto public spaces. Historical spaces like India Gate and Jantar Mantar were occupied by demonstrators, and protests were also held outside then Chief Minister Sheila Dixit’s residence, and the police headquarters (“Delhi Gang Rape: India Gate Turns into a Battleground”, 2016). At first mass text messages were sent, asking people to collect for candlelight vigils and peaceful marches. As the situation worsened due to both the state government and the Delhi Police (which is not under the purview of the Delhi Government) refusing to accept blame, as well as the then Prime Minister Manmohan Singh’s delay in issuing a statement about the incident, the State and Central governments attempted to curb the protests. Metro stations were closed to hamper the mobility of the protesters. However, the government, clearly not in touch with social media platforms like Twitter, misjudged the mood of the city. Since text messages were blocked, people began using WhatsApp, a messaging application that uses the internet instead of cellular networks. Twitter was also widely used, to mobilize as well as to make the public aware of the violent tactics that the police were resorting to.

The internet played an important role in mobilizing the urban Delhi middle class; however, that is not to say that there were

no politics of visibility involved. According to Jodi Dean, instead of contributing to democratic politics, communicative exchanges are the basic elements of capitalist production (Dean, 2005). For Dean, the content of these exchanges is irrelevant, as is the sender and the receiver. What matters is its circulation, its “addition to the pool” and hence how visible it is (Dean, 2005). Thus, these exchanges are valuable as long as they are visible, and any other contribution is secondary to its circulation. Per Dean, top-level actors circumvent the obligation to respond directly by adding to the pool their own contributions, in the hope “that sufficient volume (whether in terms of number of contributions or the spectacular nature of a contribution) will give their contributions dominance or stickiness” (Dean, 2005).

Following the Nirbhaya rape case, WhatsApp users began to change their display pictures to an image of a black dot on a white background. The dot symbolized a blot on society, a collective shame that was the fault of an entire culture that was unsafe for women. By making it their display picture, users felt they were contributing their bit towards the larger movement. They established a pattern of behavior and circulation, eliminating the message behind the image in favor of its circulation. Dean describes this ‘slacktivism’ as people thinking that “they are active, maybe even making a difference simply by clicking on a button, adding their name to a petition, or commenting on a blog” (Dean, 2005).

On the other hand, in Henry Jenkins, Sam Ford, and Joshua Green’s introduction to *Spreadable Media: Creating Value and Meaning in a Networked Culture*, the circulation of media often expands active audience participation (2013). They distinguish between spreadable media,

which engages with audiences to add value in different contexts, and sticky media, the older model of media distribution that emphasizes centralization and controlled distribution processes. The sticky model focuses on pre-structured interaction that shapes audience experiences, but spreadable media focuses on content; it uses a participatory framework in which the audiences are motivated and engage with the content. Online movements using Twitter hashtags fit this participatory model of spreadable media, but cannot be restricted to it alone.

Dean’s ‘slacktivism’ argument connects with Zizi Papacharissi’s analysis of Twitter as a platform for online political expression (2015). Papacharissi’s *Affective Publics* also discusses ideas of participatory culture that are similar to Jenkins’. She states in an interview conducted by Jenkins at University of Southern California: “forms of affective involvement can be key in connecting energies and helping reflexively drive movements forward. But they can also entangle publics in ongoing loops of engaged passivity” (2015). Instead of focusing on the physical outcome of hashtag movements, Papacharissi explores Twitter as a framework that enables connective action, uniting people with similar interests from different parts of the world. Her analysis focuses on affect, or the intensity created by emotion and expressed in tweets. It is through the affective that Twitter enables notions of collective identity and solidarity to be expressed.

In Ravi Sundaram’s *Pirate Modernity: Delhi’s Media Urbanism*, Delhi’s population already exemplified notions of collective identity, participatory design, and going toe-to-toe with a government that turned a deaf ear to the demands of its people; the same physicality translated onto online

movements after Singh's rape (2009). The protests that followed the rape were intensified due to the government's lack of response towards an agitated middle class. Proof that the government was overwhelmed and fearful of its energized electorate lies in the fact that the peaceful protests were dispersed using baton charges, water cannons, and tear gas (BBC, 2014). While police brutality was reported by the media, it was also reported live by Twitter users to generate more support for the movement.

Papacharissi uses the word 'produser' to refer to the blurring of lines between the journalist and the audience, since, on Twitter, and especially in countries where the media is censored or biased, anyone can become a reporter. In fact, since December 2012, Twitter users in India use Twitter to express their exasperation at traditional news media, accusing news anchors of sexism, and news corporations of being bought out by political parties. Hashtags that have amassed wide usage recently are #ShameOnTimesNow and #Presstitutes.

The embrace of new media technologies for political participation fits within the framework of the rise of a young middle-class population, whose activism was also visible in the India Against Corruption movement, which also relied on social media enabled citizen journalism (Denyer, 2011). This intermixing of storytelling and journalism is exemplified by tweets tweeted on December 25 2012 by nineteen-year-old Sambhavi Saxena, one of the protestors at Jantar Mantar.



{Shambhavi's tweets on December 25, 2012}

The following tweet, the claims of which were contested by the police, got retweeted more than 1,700 times, and according to social media analytics firm Favstar, reached an audience of more than 200,000 Twitter users (Barn, 2013).



Referring to the phenomenon of world populations experiencing physical space through technological space, Papacharissi calls the Internet, and specifically Twitter, an Electronic Elsewhere (2015). Saxena's tweets are just a few examples of how Twitter galvanizes civil society, turning it into an Electronic Elsewhere; within hours of her tweet, lawyers and journalists reached the police station, celebrities personally reached out to the police officers in charge, and hundreds of students gathered outside the police station in protest ( "No Santas at This Police Station," 2012). Bollywood actors in Mumbai and Indian diaspora across the

world also responded to her tweet, calling their contacts in Delhi to try and contribute.

Similar to the distinction made by Jenkins et al. between spreadable media and sticky media, Papacharissi discusses how Twitter enables connective action, in which communication is the primary form of organizing, as opposed to the hierarchical and more traditional model of collective action (Papa. Connective action favors individuality and a sense of solidarity and inclusivity based on common connective strands of interest. The hashtag #theekhai, the Hindi phrase meaning 'all is well', was used to mock the then Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's silence on the protests, and his government's inaction towards the issues being protested (Anand, 2012). The use of other hashtags like #StopThisShame, #death4rape, and #inhumanebastards provided a broader connective framework within which people expressed their own personal opinions (2013). These hashtags also amassed a collective that connected on shared emotions of public anger at the government.

Since Indian law does not permit the names of sexual assault victims to be released publicly, Twitter offered an alternative channel through which her name could be revealed ("What the Law Says on a Rape Victim's Identity", 2013). By concealing Jyoti Singh's name and using pseudonyms like #Nirbhaya, #Damini, and #Amanat, tweets discussing the rape were getting clubbed with tweets directed at conversations surrounding movies by the same names ("Hashtag Feminism and Twitter Activism in India", 2014). Several journalists felt that hiding her real name under the pretext of protecting her reputation and identity did not empower the cause, but instead perpetuated the existing gender power

relations ("Hashtag Feminism and Twitter Activism in India", 2014).

On the other hand, revealing her name granted the victim agency, and served as an umbrella term under which the student protestors, activists, and participants of the movement across the country could unite. In this way, Twitter became a medium of political collective action. Jyoti Singh's parents supported the revelation of her name, saying that they were not ashamed of her name and the country as a whole should be ashamed of the perpetrators instead of the victims (Safi, 2017).

## The Subaltern

'Subaltern' is defined as "the groups that are excluded from a society's established structures for political representation and therefore denied the means by which people have a voice in their society" (2007). Going by this definition of the subaltern within the context of women's rights in India, the middle class, and not just the economically oppressed lower classes comprised the subaltern. Groups and classes that were, for years, rendered voiceless by the government and the police, decided to make their voices heard. The subaltern decided to speak for itself. In her essay *Can the Subaltern Speak?*, Gayatri Spivak's argument is that the subaltern, due to an inbuilt structural inability, cannot speak, and it is the responsibility of those that are in more powerful positions to represent them (1988). On the other hand, Chandra Talpade Mohanty, in *Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses*, writes that the oppressed should be able to speak for themselves (Mohanty, 2017). While both Spivak and Mohanty base their arguments in a postcolonial framework, targeting the monolithic and singular description that universalizes

by a conservative society as bringing shame upon the family of the victim. Several factors, like colonial Victorian influences upon Indian tradition, notions of womanhood, and religious identities played a role in the taboo surrounding the public discourse of sexual violence. Even among the educated urban population, people felt it was better to stay silent on the matter of a rape or assault, rather than have their reputations damaged. These matters belonged to the private realm, not the public world of governance. So, when these 'private' issues finally began to be discussed in the public world of social media, the conversations connected with thousands of voices who were striving to be heard. In this way, Twitter not only connected the personal with the political and the private with the public, but it also provided a platform for millions of voices to speak. The thousands of middle class, elite protestors that filled Jantar Mantar and India Gate spoke not only for the more oppressed classes, but also for themselves.

In their respective arguments, Menon, Spivak and Mohanty critique the tendency of Western discourses of post-colonialism to create homogenous, reductionist representations of the subaltern ("The Conundrum of Agency", 2014). Even while writing about the postcolonial subject, the Western subject is still a cultural referent. In these discourses, the Western subject is the self, and the Eastern postcolonial subject is the other; the third world is relevant only as long as it follows Western narratives.

International media only reported on the movement when the protests amplified; however, once there was widespread coverage of the protests, international coverage increased drastically. Anthony Alessandrini, in *The Egyptian Revolution and the Problem of International Solidarity*, gives the example of Occupy Wall Street

sending representatives to monitor the elections in Egypt, and characterizes it as patronizing and condescending (2015). Misguided attempts at solidarity were also replicated after extensive media coverage of the Nirbhaya movement. In London and Paris, groups marched to the respective Indian embassies with petitions to make India a safer place for women, furthering the portrayal of rape as an Indian problem, as opposed to a global structural inequality ("London Protests Against Delhi Gangrape, Demands Justice for Women," 2013) (Tiwari, 2013). Movements like the anti-sexual violence movement in India have a transnational relevance, and hence call for deeper levels of international solidarity.

In March 2015, British filmmaker Leslee Udwin released a documentary titled *India's Daughter*. Based on Jyoti Singh's rape, the International Movie Database (IMDB) describes it an examination of "the society and values of India after a 23-year-old medical student is raped and murdered on a bus." The documentary included an interview with one of the accused rapists ("Silencing India's Daughter: Why Has the Indian Government Banned the Delhi Rape Film?," 2015). Conducted inside Tihar Jail in New Delhi, the police obtained a court order against the release of the documentary in India, since Udwin had entered the prison under the pretext of conducting research work, and had not told them that she would use the content in a film that would be released globally ("Silencing India's Daughter: Why Has the Indian Government Banned the Delhi Rape Film?," 2015). The police also filed a First Information Report against the filmmakers, and demanded the ban of the film due to its content being offensive enough to create an atmosphere of tension and fear among women in society. The report also stated that Udwin had paid the accused for his



The ban was widely condemned by celebrities, film actors, and activists in India, and, Indian news channel NDTV broadcasted a black screen with a flickering lamp during the time-slot that had been allotted to the documentary before the ban ("NDTV Runs Blank Screen for One Hour to Protest the Ban on 'India's Daughter,'" 2015). However, BBC UK refused to comply with the Indian Government's order, and it was screened in the UK ("UK Screens Delhi Gang-Rape Film as India Calls for Worldwide Ban," 2015). It was also uploaded on YouTube, from where Indian audiences accessed it. However, it was quickly taken down when the Indian government ordered YouTube to delete it. Arguably, the documentary was a much needed reflection of a fractured, unsafe, and patriarchal society, but it also exemplified the kind of Western discourse that Spivak's critique is directed against. Udwin, in interview conducted by npr.org, stated: "It was the protests. It was the fact that I was absolutely awestruck by the ordinary men and women of India who poured out onto the streets in response to this horrific gang rape and who demanded change for women's rights. And I thought the least I could do was amplify their voices" ("India's daughter' Opens in U.S. After Being Banned in India," 2015).

Several activists, including feminist activist Kavita Krishna, while resisting the documentary ban itself, have pointed out the inherent 'white-savior complex' in the film (DenHoed, 2015). By depicting such extreme negativity, Udwin makes sweeping generalizations about Indian men, which paint all of them as rapists. For a film that claims to be inspired by the protests following the rape, it fails to represent men who condemn sexual violence. In attempting to "amplify their voices", Udwin created a narrative that generalized Indian men and women. The interviewed rapist, Mukesh

Singh, was shown saying that Jyoti Singh should have allowed the rape, and should not have fought back. If she hadn't fought back, they would have dropped her off after raping her, and would only have beaten up Avanindra Pandey. A defense lawyer in the case, A.P. Singh, was shown saying that if his daughter or sister "engaged in pre-marital activities and disgraced herself and allowed herself to lose face and character by doing such things, I would most certainly take this sort of sister or daughter to my farmhouse, and in front of my entire family, I would put petrol on her and set her alight."

Western discussions surrounding the documentary also display similar biases. In an interview conducted by Fox News, one of the questions posed to Udwin was "when you think of rape as a culture, how do we address this? Because as you said, this is not just a problem in India this is an international epidemic, so how do we stop rape?" (Falzone, 2015) The next question states: "But like you said, the way you think of a rapist is a deranged, mentally disturbed person, but in these cultures, like you said, it comes down to a mentality, and a woman is not just a potential victim of being raped but it can be a child as young as three or five." The first question presents rape as an international problem, but the next question, with the use of the term "these cultures" exposes the construction of Indian culture as the other to the self of Western American culture.

Several Hollywood actors, including Meryl Streep and Sean Penn supported the documentary, and Streep has even said that it should receive an Oscar (Falzone, 2015). While Udwin has claimed that the documentary intends to depict a global rape epidemic, her statements in various interviews prove otherwise, pointing to Alessandrini's question in his essay; when do

## Conclusion

The significance of the movement goes beyond the incident itself, since it also opened up conversations surrounding similar incidents that had preceded it and those that came afterward. Now that a coherent space for conversation about sexual violence had been created, activists and journalists addressed issues that were mostly neglected by mainstream narratives, caste based sexual violence in rural areas, and marital rape. Twitter and Facebook conversations regarding sexual politics and violence also gravitated towards the 'unknown Nirbhayas'. The word 'survivor' started being used in public discourse instead of the term 'victim', since activists stressed the importance of rape being understood as another form of violence, as opposed to its construction as the worst form of violence that can be inflicted upon someone. It was also acknowledged that men and transgender individuals are also raped, and sexual violence isn't only a women's issue. The impact of the movement was felt across South Asian countries like Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Nepal, where marches and demonstrations against sexual violence were held, and the movement was hailed as the rebirth of the fight for gender equality in South Asia ("Nirbhaya Case: The Incident That Shook the Nation," 2017).

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# Channels of Change in South Sudan: Youth Civil Society Organizations & Critical Empathy in Nation-Building

*Amel Aldehaib*

Through a case study of the South Sudanese Upper Nile Youth Development Association (UNYDA), the author illustrates how youth have the potential to assist communities in dealing with past and current violence, restoring trust, and rebuilding social fabric. These are key factors for service delivery, social construction, and social and economic development in the journey towards nation-building. I propose an adoption of youth-centered programs by both state and international actors in order to empower youth organizations to take a primary role in efforts to end the violence in South Sudan, restore trust, and rebuild the country's social fabric.

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Prior to July 2011, Sudan, Africa's largest country, possessed extraordinary ethnic and cultural diversity (Akolawin 1973). However, one of the major challenges for Sudan since gaining independence in 1956 from Anglo-Egyptian colonial rule has been building a coherent nation-state out of such diversity society. Unfortunately, Sudan's leaders have not risen to this challenge – indeed, the last six decades have seen brutal civil wars, and a succession of parliamentary and military governments that have ignored or exploited Sudan's ethnic and cultural diversity in pursuit of their own factional political and economic agendas. The cause of Sudan's civil war is complex: "religion, local perceptions of race, social status, economic exploitation, and colonial and post-colonial interventions are all elements in Sudan's civil war, but none, by itself, fully explain it" (Johnson 2003, 1-2), with the Sudanese state playing a critical and central role in hindering regional development, while producing racial and cultural antagonisms (Ibid). As a result, tension amongst different ethnicities and cultures has repeatedly escalated in different parts of the country, especially between Northern and Southern Sudan (1955-1972) and (1983-2005) and in other regions like the Nuba Mountains and Blue Nile (more recently Darfur). Francis Deng describes the conflict between North and South Sudan as a "conflict of identities." Southerners claim that they were being oppressed by the northerners, whom they view as having imposed their culture (Islamic/Arabic) as "the national identity [and the determinant of] the distribution of power, wealth, services and development opportunities" (Deng 2009, 10).

As a result, Sudanese society became polarized and divided along two lines. Even though the war was between North and South Sudan, there were considerable fractions among the tribes of each region.

Both parties (SPLA/M and the government of Sudan) mobilized different tribes as their proxy, creating tensions and divisions among these groups. In South Sudan, this situation created tensions between and among some southern tribes, which led to continuous fighting, mistrust, and the destruction of the social fabric that had once held these groups together. As explained by Jok Madut Jok (2013):

In the war between North and South Sudan, before independence, tribal militias were formed and had been involved in Khartoum's attempts to fight the South by proxy, and these militias have left behind strained tribal relations, some of which continue to present the new country with serious disarmament challenges. The same was true for the attempts by the southern opposition to create its own militias to defend their communities or the occasional deployment of some units of the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA) to respond to pockets of resistance by some ethnic groups to the SPLA's agenda, where many excesses took place in what escalated at times into a South-South confrontation (2).

Even though tribes in South Sudan, like many other tribes in Africa, have historically competed over grazing pasture and engaged in cattle rustling practices that often triggered cycles of inter-tribal violence, conflicts have always been mitigated by the customary law system. However, political mobilization deepened the divisions between tribes and caused more harm and violence. In their analysis of the conflict between the Nuer and Dinka peoples, Aleu Akechak Jok et al. cites a Nuer chief who notes that:

They used to tell us that the reason why Nuer and Dinka fight each other was because we are ignorant. We don't know anything because we are not educated. But now look at all this killing! This war between the Nuer and Dinka is much worse than anything we experienced in the past. And it is the war of [the] educated [elite]- It is not our war at all! (1999, 131).

These tensions<sup>1</sup> generate fear within communities, causing tribes to become afraid of each other and draw physical boundaries to protect themselves against further bloodshed. These ethnic borders can only be crossed at the risk of one's life. Jok defines ethnic division as a threat to political unity and the nation building project, and by extension, the nation's very existence:

Current relations between ethnic groups are often influenced by stereotypes that write off entire ethnic groups as 'enemies of state' and that tie entire ethnic groups to certain political or military figures with checkered war-time histories (2013, 4).

The Sudan Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA), was signed in 2005, granting South Sudan the right to decide its future through an internationally monitored referendum. However, it is worth noting that this agreement was largely political in regard to the sharing of wealth and power. No transitional justice mechanisms, such as criminal persecution, truth commission or reparations, were in place to address past issues. As such, wartime violence and trauma inflicted and experienced by communities in South Sudan remained

unaddressed. In January 2011, Southern Sudan overwhelmingly voted for separation, and the Republic of South Sudan was born as an independent state in July of the same year.

## Preface

This paper was completed in October 2012. Since that time, there have been major political changes in the newly declared state of South Sudan. In December of 2013, intrastate conflict erupted within the newly emerged state, resulting in a devastating impact on the Sudanese people. Civilians represent the main target of the current ongoing conflict between the warring parties. The fighting is mostly along ethnic lines, resulting in a humanitarian crisis that displaced 2.7 million people, with over 1 million fleeing Sudan to seek refuge in neighboring countries (Blanchard 2016). The causes of this conflict have been explained by political commentator Mahmood Mamdani:

How does one understand the current conflict in South Sudan? Two major explanations are on offer: The first claims it as an ethnic struggle between the two largest groups in the country, the Dinka and the Nuer, the first led by President Salva Kiir, and the second by his deputy, Riek Machar. The second explanation sees it as a power struggle between individuals in the SPLM/A Leadership. Neither explanation can be ignored; however, they aren't sufficient to explain the conflict. This is because both ignore key ingredients in the conflict: the process of state

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<sup>1</sup> Three main ethnic groups in Bahr El Ghazal (Dinka, Fertit, and Jur) and three main tribes in Upper Nile (Dinka, Shluk, and Nuer)

formation that has further politicized ethnic allegiances, and the ideological preferences that both intersect with, and soften, ethnic conflict (Aljazeera 2014).

John Young (2012), on the other hand criticizes the international US-Led Sudan (CPA), for its failure to promote democratic transitions and peace in the two Sudans. Young attributes the failure of the CPA to the fact that it was exclusively negotiated between the two major parties to the conflict and excluded civil society and rebel groups. The current situation in South Sudan confirm what this paper attempts to reflect: the fragile peace in South Sudan and the unresolved status of past ethnic tensions and grievances between ethnic groups that have contributed to the weakening of its social fabric and nation-building processes. The paper's key message is that youth and youth organizations are agents that could play a critical role in conflict transformation, social construction, and social fabric repair within the divided nation of Sudan in order to nation-building that embraces diversity.

Macro-mechanism approaches to peace, like peace agreements, which contribute to ending conflict and maintaining certain economic aspects of civilian life, address only a narrow part of peace and recovery. In this paper, I argue that this framework alone does not guarantee political, social, and economic recovery at a community level; moreover, I argue that this framework cannot guarantee lasting peace unless it includes efforts by civilians—and youth (civil society organizations) in particular—who have the potential to address political, social, and economic challenges in a way that is meaningful to ordinary people at the local level.

The below is a dialogue below between two Somali cousins - one of whom is a representative for a Somali civilian organization, while the other is a representative of a key political party in Somalia - at an UN-sponsored Somali national reconciliation conference. Their interaction accurately captures the dilemma of pursuing peace in the African context. The representative for the Somali civilian organization asks:

“How is it that you warlords think that one of you has the right to be president?” He was referring to the political haggling and resulting impasse that seemed to occur at every Somali peace conference as a result of contending claims over what clan, and ultimately what person, would rise to presidency. “Don't you know... that without a frame the roof of a house collapses?”

“You know as well as I,” replied the chairman [the key political leader], deftly shifting metaphors... “the key to a healthy body is a good head. I have never seen legs walk or arms move without a head.”

“Dear cousin,” ...[he] replied with a deep note of sadness, “the house has collapsed. The legs have been crushed, the arms are bled clean. There is no body to be head of” (Lederach 1997).

Violent conflict divides communities and damages the social fabric that represents the body of the nation. How to repair the body of the nation remains a major challenge facing many African countries whose wars have been characterized by multilayered conflict, with ethnic/tribal conflict feeding the macro-level conflict. It is surprising how “it has become commonplace to contrast how today it is civilians who are the targets



whereas ‘before’, especially in the First World War, it was the military” (Last 2000, 370). There are many reasons for targeting civilians, but polarizing and dividing society by creating an us/them mentality based on ethnicity, race, culture, and language is a central tactic, as it makes it easier for politicians to exploit identity differences as part of a “divide and rule” strategy that provides them access to power and resources. The challenge that remains is rebuilding the social fabric—which constitutes the body, and which Lederach refers to as the “peace house” that was destroyed by the civil war—necessary to create an enabling environment for political, social, and economic repair. Though rarely acknowledged, polarized and divided societies still hold enormous social capital that allows them to overcome harsh circumstances, such as even war.

This paper addressed the following questions:

How should we understand peace, social repair, and civil society organizations, in particular within an African society?

What organizational strategies does UNYDA use to address the ethnic divisions among Sudanese youth?

How does UNYDA define peace and social repair? How do they define “polarization” and “breach of trust?”

## Why This Topic?

The war between North and South Sudan did more than trigger violence at the state level between the armies of these states, it also triggered violence among different ethnicities within South Sudan and deepened divisions among different ethnicities. In order to resolve the conflict, the CPA, signed by Sudan People’s Liberation

Army/Movement (SPLA/M) and the Government of Sudan were introduced as part of a diplomatic strategy for sharing wealth and power between the two main warring parties. The CPA addressed the conflict and tension between SPLA/M (who claimed to represent South Sudan) and the National Congress Party (NCP) (who claimed to represent the government of North Sudan). Unfortunately, grassroots voices were not heard during the negotiation process, as civil society was excluded from the negotiation. As such, inter-group ethnic divisions and land-related violence remained unaddressed, leaving local communities as vulnerable targets. In a context of fragile peace such as this, it is vital to heal the social fabric that was damaged by war in order to restore trust, which in turn could foster a greater degree of social coexistence and nation-building.

## Methodology

The definition of a civil society organization and its role in reconciliation, especially in divided societies, has been analyzed in a wide range of literature. To demonstrate the role of civil society in reconciliation and social repair at a local level, I have compiled a case study of a youth civil society organization in South Sudan. In order to document organizational experiences and accomplishments, I have performed an analysis of reports, reviews, and discussions with UNYDA leaders. In addition, I have provided a literature review that details an essential conceptual framework for this topic.

## Conceptual Framework

Once the direct conflict is over, community members who have lived together for centuries, but who have committed acts of violence against each other typically have no



alternative but to remain living together and sharing land and livelihoods:

When violent conflict ends or a harsh totalitarian state collapses, the perpetrators and victims of violence must often resettle together in their communities. This can be immensely difficult when neighbors and even family members have fought on opposite sides of a conflict or attacked each other. The sheer numbers of participants in the violence, the various perceptions of who was in the “right” or in the “wrong” and the presence of struggling state institutions make the pursuit of justice and reconciliation quite complex (Anderlini et al. 2012, 1).

In an ethnically divided society moving beyond individual legal accountability, attaining peace requires addressing collective responsibility, which is essential to repairing the social fabric of the nation. Robust civil society organizations, like youth organizations, have the potential to rebuild a healthy nation.

#### *SOCIAL REPAIR*

Social repair is a contextual concept that can take different forms and that has a significant impact on community members by assisting them in moving forward with their lives. It is about rebuilding healthy and non-violent relationships between victims and perpetrators to turn the us/them mentality into a we. Depending on the needs of a given group and how interested they are in healing and reintegration, social repair can take the form of psychological, social, economic, or political empowerment. Weinstein and Fletcher (2002) note that there is both a growing need and interest among different countries to find effective ways of recovering from mass violence. They

argue that, although international criminal trials that address individual accountability are important, they only offer one avenue for social repair. Instead, Weinstein and Fletcher (2002) call for a community-based approach to healing; this approach shows how a response to social breakdown addresses the collective processes of social repair by moving beyond individual accountability and addressing collective guilt and collective responsibility.

#### *THE CONCEPT OF PEACE*

Peace is not just an end to fighting; it encompasses social and cultural transformation. Galtung distinguishes between negative and positive peace, noting that negative peace is characterized simply by an absence of direct violence—which in itself does not indicate a full and lasting end to conflict—whereas positive peace is present when both structural and cultural violence have been overcome. Top-down peace is a process whose main actor is the international community, whose involvement includes:

Short-term, centralism and political measures primarily undertaken by external agents, even though attention is paid to the consent and support of the indigenous players...While the bottom-up approach to peace is one in which people themselves are empowered as the main actors in political and economical life (Bendaña 2003, 25).

The thesis and lens of this paper is based on “positive peace” that is developed from a “bottom-up” approach.

#### *CIVIL SOCIETY AND SOCIETY REPAIR*

Civil society has been described as the collective consciousness of citizens and the

entity occupying the vacuum between the family and the state. More formally, it can be defined as "the assemblage of associations outside of the state and government that would otherwise wish to influence the direction of public affairs including political discourse and action by using and expanding political space" (Wanyande 1996, 6). Goran Hyden points to the importance of civil society as a collective consciousness that has the capacity to make life more meaningful to the people it represents (Oxfam Canada 2002, 10) and whose civil society is uniquely situated to impact processes at both the top and grassroots levels (Hyden 2002).

In the context of a polarized society, civil society is a pre-requisite for social coexistence and social repair. Kimberly Theidon argues that the gap between political leaders and the micro-politics of reconciliation "invites us to consider the extent to which 'democratic transition' and processes of 'national reconciliation' may be little more than the reconfiguration of elite pacts of domination or governability unless these national processes are articulated with social reconstruction at the local level" (2006, 5-6). As conflicts always entail an us versus them mentality, Theidon argues that the crucial challenge in transitional justice is to re-humanize them, thus transforming them into us. In such a polarized context, the fact that communities still possess enormous social capital, which allows them to survive harsh environments and help people realize their latent potential for repairing livelihoods and achieving their own security objectives is often overlooked. Furthermore, violence does not seem to completely take over people's subjectivities; instead, in such contexts, "resisting the oppressor becomes less important than recovery, and the past can matter less than the future" (Last 2000, 370).

However, the role of civil society in general

and youth organizations in particular must be understood within the context of the relevant society, and its meaning must be articulated within its political and historical contexts if it is to have any relevance at all. Moving beyond centralism, traditional international top-level interventions and addressing the long-term and short-term objectives led by indigenous actors represent sustainable solutions to the root causes of the conflict (Bendaña 2003, 6). However, the work of civil society does not go without challenges. It has always been difficult for civil society organizations to flourish in both North and South Sudan due to isolation and insecurity. In the war torn region of East Africa in general, civil society faces fewer risks when it is engaged in social and economic matters because its work is "interpreted by the state as complementary and part of nation-building," while its efforts to work on civil and political matters are "seen as lobby[ing] for changes in the way the state or society operates" (Hyden & Halimariam 2003, 225). This perception exposes the leaders of these organizations to violence, and potentially even torture, by the state authorities.

However, a considerable number of youth activist groups have been willing to take on these risks and engage in socio-politics matters of challenging the us versus them ideology that has fueled the civil war. This is not to say that all CSOs have purely good intentions; indeed, some might actually do more harm than good - either because they lack vision, are beholden to the agendas of the state, or operate under frameworks that sometimes fail to correctly capture and reflect the historical, social, cultural, and political realities of the local communities they are serving.

*THE IMPACT OF THE CONFLICT ON SOUTH SUDANESE  
YOUTH*

Conflict impacts different population groups differently (Thompson 2007). Generally, in taking part in conflicts to defend the nation, many youths have lost their lives, and a large number of the survivors have suffered extreme damage resulting in disabilities. Furthermore, many more have lost opportunities for education and consequently lack the professional skills that provide access to income and job opportunities. This is true for many countries in Africa, including Sudan and South Sudan.

In 2008, a youth representative of the Sudanese churches addressed an ecumenical solidarity team during their visit to Southern Sudan. In this address, they pointed out that:

The Sudanese youth, especially in the South, were born in the war and became military oriented. The element has rooted to a culture of hatred, hostility and aggressiveness. It is a challenge because the young people would take time to dedicate their energy and eradicate this culture, meanwhile we deplore the fact that in some areas, youth are mobilized to fight in the militias (South Sudan Youth Representative Report, 2).

Where nation-building is still in the making (Sudan and South Sudan), youth are mobilized and called upon as “imagined” defenders and protectors of the nation by politicians in power in both countries. For example, in South Sudan, where 72% of the population are under 30 years old (Ensor 2013), youth are called upon to defend the nation going through crises and risks imposed by rebel groups. In 2012, political leader Paul Akol told South Sudanese youth

to unite and defend the nation “I call upon all youth in all bomas, payams, and counties all over the states of South Sudan to unite as one. It’s time to defend the country and you should be ready to do so when called upon,” said Akol, as members applauded.” (Sudan Tribune 2012).

Giddens argues that the way in which youth are socialized defines their post-conflict actions: “in countries where youth serve in the armed forces, militias or the military, they are not only likely to be involved in violence, but also have the technical know-how required to ‘ignite’ war, which once again threatens the polity, the nation, and the order itself” (Tsuma 2009, 128). However, in this paper, I argue that youth, whether they are victims of war or not, are potential actors in peace-building and social reconstruction efforts in divided societies. I will illustrate this premise in the following section, by presenting an example of a youth organization in South Sudan that has and continues to play a crucial role in social repair and social construction in South Sudan.

### **A Case Study: The Upper Nile Youth Development Association (UNYDA) <sup>2</sup>**

In order to better understand youth activism’s role in social repair in South Sudan, a case study of UNYDA will be used to illustrate how UNYDA has strategized, engaged with, and challenged the youth’s war mind-set, as well as facilitated connections and contributed to the social repair of the youth groups in the Upper Nile State.

### **UNYDA’s Organizational Profile**

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<sup>2</sup> Data was collected through personal discussions with UNYDA’s members from July to August 2012, as well as from UNYDA’s internal reports.

According to one of the leaders of UNYDA, UNYDA is a youth organization that was founded in 1997 in Malakal, which is in the Upper Nile State of South Sudan. UNYDA's leadership is made up of young professionals (male and female) from different tribes and religions who were fortunate to have had access to varying degrees of education. These passionate young leaders were motivated to act in an environment that had traditionally been hostile to civil society mobilization. Though founded in 1997, UNYDA only formally registered as an NGO in 2003. This delay in registration was largely due to suspicion on the part of government officials (Sudan NCP government) who saw youth civil society organizations like UNYDA as a threat to their own legitimacy at that time. Hence, UNYDA had been forced to work in a very limited civic space until the signing of the CPA, which created more space and freedom for civil society in South Sudan. With support from Oxfam Canada in its early stage, UNYDA was able to build both its institutional and organizational capacity, which later enabled it to expand and reach out to different stakeholders and resource providers.

UNYDA works primarily on building a network of youth associations across the state and transforming the deep-rooted cultural norms and mindsets created by decades of war and instability. The opening up of the political sphere has allowed UNYDA to extend its activities to different counties within the Upper Nile State. UNYDA operates in the Upper Nile region of South Sudan, a region on the border between South Sudan and Sudan. Because of its location, the Upper Nile region bore the brunt of the violence during the civil war/liberation struggle. The Upper Nile State has since become one of the most marginalized and devastated regions in South Sudan because of the presence and activities of militias, harsh environmental

conditions, and the state's proximity to the cultural and military population of the North (UNDP 2012, 2).

## **UNYDA's Conceptual Framework for Social Repair**

### *AT THE ORGANIZATIONAL LEVEL*

During its formation, UNYDA based its conceptualization of social repair on challenging the politics of ethnic division inherited by South Sudan's youth during civil war (us vs. them), as well as addressing the actual needs and interests of these youth both as actors in, and victims of the civil war. During the North/South Sudan civil war, the government of Sudan adopted political mobilization that was partially shaped by racial/religious affiliations in the name of the ethno-cultural nationalism and nation-building project that is based on racial/religious differences (i.e. "Muslim/Arab" vs. "Christian/African"). However, in their response to fight back against the government of Sudan, some leaders within South Sudan, have attempted to mobilize youth based on ethnic differences. On some occasions, youth mobilized across different ethnicities fought each other when internal conflict erupted within South Sudan between different leaders. As such, they created an us vs. them mentality based on ethnicity that has persisted despite the end of the North/South Sudan civil war.

Hence, UNYDA recognized that engaging with the political element of the conflict was the key first step towards social repair and transforming the lives of youth in the Upper Nile State. UNYDA believes that, in the context of this polarized and divided society, organizational identity matters as much as organizational interventions in addressing the needs and interests of different youth groups. UNYDA went through a process of bringing together youth from

organizational interventions in addressing the needs and interests of different youth groups. UNYDA went through a process of bringing together youth from different backgrounds (i.e. ethnic, political, gender, and religious) in order to forge a common identity that reflects diversity. Organizational leaders wanted UNYDA to be seen by the community “as a model of how different identities can form a common national identity, and how diversity can be (a) strength rather than weakness and a source of peace rather than war and division” (author’s interview with Charles Judo 2012)<sup>3</sup>.

To create a common national identity amongst differences, the organization has to overcome deep mistrust from youths with regards to its inner motives. However, UNYDA manages this mistrust through initiatives that are focused on diversity, continuous dialogue, and collective action, as well as ensures that its team members represent different identities in all of its activities and community outreach efforts. In addition, UNYDA ensures that its activities reach out to a wide variety of the region’s communities, which has been a difficult process characterized by both progress and setbacks. Members of the organization represent different tribes, enabling the organization to navigate uneasiness among youth from different groups. Indeed, UNYDA’s ability to reach out to youth from all tribes has enabled it to become a model for unity across differences (UNYDA Report 2010, 3).

This brilliant strategy represents a real challenge for the brand of identity politics that had been employed during civil war. UNYDA has challenged the “divide and rule” approach to identity politics employed during the civil war, and has

made considerable progress in freeing youth from their dichotomous wartime mindset by engaging them in a dialogue that addresses the issues of peace, development, and social healing. This discourse has helped the youth to reshape their individual social and political identities into a new common national identity.

#### *AT THE COMMUNITY LEVEL*

In order to contribute to political, social, and economic repair, UNYDA designed its interventions to address the needs and interests of the region’s youth in their dual identities as both victims/survivors and actors in the war. In a polarized and divided society, the process of how the services are delivered is equally important as an organization’s identity and its reflection of the diversity in the community. This is relevant with regards to using repair to address the different components of the system that gave rise to a given conflict. Consequently, UNYDA has designed its activities for different youth in a way that facilitates the coming together of youth across differences while responding to their unique needs and interests. In this sense, UNYDA’s social repair activities are not only service delivery, they also contain aspects of political transformation and social transformation.

UNYDA creates a space where youth (female and male) from different ethnic and religious backgrounds can come together to overcome differences and to interconnect by facilitating dialogue aimed at changing mindsets inherited from the war regarding development issues concerning youth in their counties. In addition, these discourses also aim to help young entrepreneurs across differences gain access to new ideas

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<sup>3</sup> Charles Judo was the secretary general of UNYDA.



*SUPPORTS THE INSTITUTIONAL CAPACITY OF  
VOLUNTARY YOUTH ORGANIZATIONS AT THE COUNTY  
LEVEL*

Through skills training, the dissemination of organizational development materials, and the provision of small operational grants to its member organizations at the county level, UNYDA helps mobilize youth as agents of change by creating a space where they can reflect on how they can move towards the future and take advantage of the space made available by the CPA.

UNYDA awards its grants with a goal of creating space for local youth groups from different tribes to develop a culture of diversity and peace as well as collective accountability. UNYDA encourages local groups (who had been mobilized by different factions in the conflict) to develop organizational identities that are independent from prior political and tribal affiliations in order to give rise to a multi-voice civil society that fosters the values of diversity and peaceful co-existence. Youth associations at the county level are set up in a simple way that enables them to establish dialogues between different groups of youths and to organize awareness-raising activities relating to issues that are relevant to youth who are adjusting to post-war life (for example, prioritizing HIV education and gender-based violence using MDGs as an advocacy platform).

*FACILITATES EDUCATION*

UNYDA has been particularly proactive in the area of education, especially in addressing the education of girls. Many girls and women never get an opportunity to attend school due to the impact of war on the female population and the cultural notion that it is useless to educate girls. In response, UNYDA established a girls' education campaign at both the community

and decision-making level. UNYDA employed gender-action learning in order to build community consciousness and awareness regarding gender equality in education.

*ORGANIZES DIALOGUES WITH THE TRADITIONAL  
LEADERS AND YOUTH OF COMMUNITIES THAT ARE  
VICTIMS AND /OR PERPETRATORS OF TRIBAL VIOLENCE*

In its efforts to heal and unite divided communities, UNYDA creates spaces for dialogue where traditional leaders and youth from different tribes can come together and reflect on the best ways to move forward. One example of UNYDA's interventions was a community-healing workshop they hosted in Malakal in 2009 that was intended to alleviate some of the tensions that still existed between the Colo and Dinka tribes. Furthermore, this workshop was facilitated together with the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation (IJR), and it brought together traditional leaders, youth, women, and other civil society stakeholders from different tribes (Nuer, Colo, Shilluk, and Dinka). The following account of the workshop was provided by one of the UNYDA's executive committee members:

The process was unfolding rather well until the South African facilitators engaged the participants in drawing the map of their respective counties. The chiefs misunderstood the exercise and turned sullen (as land has been a cause of tension). They feared that the drawing of the Malakal county could re-ignite tensions. They turned their back and refused to take part in the exercise. The whole process came to a standstill. Some chiefs were clearly upset and started shouting and blaming UNYDA for having a hidden agenda. Then the facilitators opened up the space for others to intervene. Odong

Mayik, one of the UNYDA's members stood up and politely reminded the chiefs that the facilitators came from a society that had experienced deep and bloody racial divisions between blacks and whites, which were eventually overcome. "This is why they are here with us today". Then the UNYDA member started singing a song written by Gordon Kong, a famous blind singer from Southern Sudan praising what unites Sudanese along the Nile. Odonk started singing, he gestured the group to stand up and join him. The chiefs sang along beating the rhythm with their hands. When finished, much of the tension had gone and the workshop facilitators carried forward (UNYDA Report 2010, 31).

This anecdote clearly indicates how the UNYDA handles the mistrust and tensions surrounding its determination to challenge the politics of difference. Many UNYDA members received tension management training both in Sudan and outside of Sudan, including South Africa. The UNYDA's approach to managing tensions is to facilitate a process that is oriented to ultimately allowing people to move forward, since the CPA lacked any significant measures for addressing the past, leaving grievances of people who were affected by the civil war unaddressed. However, it is worth noting that, working with such a framework was not an easy process for UNYDA, yet UNYDA's members showed great resilience and determination in rebuilding the nation.

*PROVIDES SMALL GRANTS TO YOUNG ENTREPRENEURS  
WITH ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL AGENDAS*

Due to war and insecurity in the past, the people of the Upper Nile State have no self-sufficient crops, forcing them to resort to importing commodities from North Sudan at inflated prices that most people cannot

afford. Through external funding, UNYDA provides small grants for youth farmers, with the objectives of helping them to gain access to income and to grow crops locally at prices that are affordable for the local community. By engaging in the distribution of small grants, UNYDA attempts to bring together young entrepreneurs from different backgrounds to work individually and collectively to realize both their personal agendas as well as broader community agendas. This initiative has been a success as it has led to greater availability of more vegetables at lower costs in the markets of Malakal. Furthermore, this initiative has given young entrepreneurs access to employment opportunities, and thus the potential for a sustainable livelihood.

*ACTS AS AN INTERMEDIARY BETWEEN YOUTH VICTIMS  
& RESOURCE PROVIDERS TO HELP VICTIMS RESUME  
NORMAL LIVES*

The UNYDA mentors groups of young war victims (with physical disabilities caused by gun violence or landmines) and helps connect them with relevant resource providers. For instance, a group of young people who had been handicapped by landmines approached the UNYDA to help them organize themselves into a group (called the Malakal Mobile Theatre Team (MMTT)) which UNYDA also hosted. Not only did UNYDA's help save them from having to go through the long civil society registration process stipulated by government, but it also helped the group gain access to resources from different donors, including UNICEF, which has helped many of these survivors in their healing journey.

It is clear that, besides challenging a political identity that is based on an us vs. them mentality towards the formation of a new identity that reflects the organization's diversity as a strategy, UNYDA's



*WHAT DOES SOCIAL REPAIR MEAN FOR UNDYA?*

UNDYA's approach to social repair addresses the political, social, and economic levels of the system, which were all part of the process that led to violence. UNYDA sees social repair as more than just addressing the practical needs of youth affected by war. Its definition of social repair and approach is predicated upon challenging the politics of difference (divide and rule) that gave rise to war. Recognizing the social and political community divisions that had been deepened by the war, UNYDA engaged itself in a process of identity formation that would represent youths from a variety of ethnic, gender, and religious identities. At the social and economic levels, UNYDA has engaged in breaking down the isolation of youth from different tribes and from religions outside political and traditional life by creating spaces for dialogue, providing access to information and skill development, and harnessing the influence of traditional leaders. UNYDA has also engaged in addressing the practical and strategic needs of young women and men who have been affected by war. Some examples of these needs include education, HIV treatment and awareness, access to income, as well as the connection of youth groups with special needs with resource providers.

*UNDYA TODAY*

The current destruction taking place in South Sudan impacts UNYDA both as an organization as well as in regard to its individual members, most of whom are forced to flee the Upper Nile city of Malakal to different counties or to Juba. Still, members of UNYDA have shown great resilience in maintaining social fabric through different interventions and work strategies within various affected counties in the Upper Nile State. Different members of UNYDA, though physically separated,

have maintained a strong organizational presence through their operations in different counties and displaced persons camps. Currently, UNYDA has expanded its web of relationships at the national level with state authorities, local government and other international organizations, reaching out to different communities and youth groups.

## Conclusion

In a context where local communities that share the same land become polarized and mobilized along ethnic lines to fuel national conflict, they may find it difficult to heal, reconcile with each other and forge a common identity and a common future. This is especially true in cases where a political top-down "negative peace" framework was used to end the conflict, like the CPA. In such a context, where there were no mechanisms in place to redress the past, youth, who are mostly called upon their services to defend and protect the nation, are well situated to do so during peacetime. Youth and youth organizations have the potential to heal the social fabric that was damaged by war, restore trust, which in turn could foster a greater degree of social coexistence and nation-building.

In an effort to rebuild the social fabric in South Sudan that was damaged by the civil war, Upper Nile Youth Development's strategy focused on the formation of organizational identity that challenges the politics of difference and polarization in their community by uniting as a diverse group of youth across ethnicities, political affiliations, religion, and gender. This approach of diversity in representation, both in the organization's executive board and in the process of delivering services to the community, represents a strong and alternatives model of governance

by re-imagining confluence of the people of South Sudan as an ethnically and tribally diverse, yet unified nation. Ultimately, this paper provides evidence to suggest that state-led nation-building efforts in South Sudan should pay special attention to the role of youth and strategize to align their inclusion in any efforts to end the current violence, rebuild the social fabric that hold the nation, and achieve sustainable “positive peace” in South Sudan.

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Journal issues are published twice yearly during each Fall and Spring semester. The blog offers a daily platform for discussion and reflection on how academic theories relate to current events unfolding in real time. We hope that *gnovis* can serve as a resource for everyone interested in this space, whether you are a scholar, a practitioner, or a mere passerby

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