

USING DIGITAL INTERVENTIONS TO ENGAGE IN THE EVERYDAY

Abstract

This themed issue of MIA advances our understanding of how digital media are implicated in processes of change. It interrogates how people engage digital media in creative practices that lead to interventions in their own or others' lives, and explores the intentionalities through which they do this, and the processes and experiences such activities involve. The intention is to bring to the fore the idea of intervening as a way of being active in the world – as a scholar, creative practitioner, activist or simply someone living their everyday life in ways that seek to generate forms of change. The articles in this issue address the use of creative interventions for affective and community-constructing ends, examining and highlighting the conscious use of the digital to disrupt and subvert existing patterns in communication and culture, heralding new possibilities while promoting inclusivity and social innovation.

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To achieve this aim, the volume brings together a set of articles that showcase and analyse how digital media are being used across different but related disciplines, including the digital arts, scriptwriting, curating and the archive, communication and performance studies. These articles address the use of creative interventions for affective and community-constructing ends, examining and highlighting the conscious use of the digital to disrupt and subvert existing patterns in communication and culture, heralding new possibilities while promoting inclusivity and social innovation.

The collection simultaneously demonstrates how methodological and theoretical approaches, along with disciplinary commitments, intersect, diverge and develop in line with the growing work in this field. A central concern with the disruptive use of digital interventions in creative practice takes the quotidian focus of cultural studies, and allies the creativity of digital arts with existing areas in which media and communications studies subvert the status quo. This special issue reflects the increasing range of theoretical and empirical publications on digital media and their place in everyday life, activism and change (e.g. to name but a few, Couldry, 2012; Deuze, 2012; Castells, 2013), relating these to the wider arts and humanities (Bartscherer and Coover, 2011). The examples provided here offer novel ways of understanding human creativity and ‘making’ (Ingold, 2013), bringing something new to the debate by addressing these issues together within a digital media-based context.

Through an interrogation of the creative imperative as constitutive of the everyday, and taking seriously the reliance of such creativity upon digital affordances, this special issue opens up new questions around, for example, the lives of Australia’s same sex-attracted sexting teenagers and young adults, toddlers’ use of tablets, digital arts interventions in climate-change debates and the scripting of stand-up comedy on YouTube with serious intent. It encompasses both the use of the digital to achieve creative ends and the creative use of digital interventions to disrupt the social status quo, showcasing points of connection between diverse approaches to these subject areas.

In ‘The “Make it Possible” Multimedia Campaign: Generating a New “Everyday” in Animal Welfare’, Debbie Rodan and Jane Mummery explore a novel application of the affective economy to Animals Australia’s activist ambition to intervene in everyday decisions around people’s consumption of factory farm-produced animal products. The Make It Possible campaign (www.makeitpossible.com) harnesses digital media and crowd-sourcing techniques to help change people’s everyday attitudes to food animals, encouraging them to see all animals as worthy of the compassion and kindness generally extended to ‘furred family’ – domestic pets. With a variety of opportunities to pledge a personal commitment to changed food-consumption patterns, and to share an individual’s ‘My Make It Possible Story’, the campaign offers an example of a sophisticated use of digital media that has effected an intervention in the lives of hundreds of thousands of Australians.

John Charles Ryan’s article on ‘Natural Heritage Conservation and Eco-digital Poiesis: A Western Australian Example’ approaches an equivalent challenge from the opposite perspective. Whereas Animals Australia has already created its digital intervention, Ryan’s ambition is to harness digital technologies to enable new ways of relating to Western Australia’s flora, recognising crossover components of nature, culture and botanical heritage. Western Australia is a recognised biodiversity hotspot (the ‘Wildflower State’) and FloraCultures combines ethnographic and design elements into a conservation initiative that will ultimately invite participation and engagement from across the community, fostering new attitudes to climate change, the environment and an everyday understanding of what it is to share heritage. Ryan harnesses a term from Ancient Greek, *poiesis*, to describe his twenty-first-century eco-digital intervention, using ecological, botanical, cultural and ethnographic discourses to inform his making of interactive digital experiences. The digital repository combining these separate elements will create a focus for, and engender a growing community commitment towards, the conservation of Western Australia’s natural heritage, recognising its biocultural importance.

A very different digital repository, in this case associated with Circus Oz, is used to explore the conceptual frameworks within which we can examine the contribution of an archive. David Carlin’s ‘A Digital Archive in the Circus: Between the Archive

and the Repertoire' explores the complexities and sensitivities of creating, and making digitally accessible, records of the everyday in the life of a performing arts institution. Although circus artists are committed to delivering immersive, site-specific, ephemeral experiences to live audiences, they have routinely recorded their shows for a range of purposes unconnected with the establishment of an archive, with most material never designed or imagined for public consumption. The 'Circus Oz Living Archive' celebrates the history of the organisation, founded in 1978, but also collects and makes available a range of resources that can inform its future direction. Indeed, Carlin's persuasive argument is that this kind of repository functions effectively as a kind of digital performance in its own right, blurring the functions of archive and repertoire. Drawing upon performance theory to argue that the archive is both performance and meta-performance, Carlin establishes the important contribution made by an archive with the capacity to fuel interventions in the life of the organisation that it memorialises.

Whereas Rodan and Mummery's article addresses the affective economy, and Ryan's argues for the value of practice-led research in examining interconnections between thinking and making, Tom Penney's contribution develops both of these themes. In 'Bodies Under Glass: Gay Dating Apps and the Affect-Image', Penney combines the experience of the practice-based digital artist with an everyday engagement in the gay dating scene, inflecting both of these roles with the conceptual approach of the doctoral student interested in the Deleuzian idea of the affection-image and the face. Deleuze's concept positions the close-up of the face as seeing and being seen – a façade, but also an aspect of the body through which to relate affectively. Penney takes this further, arguing that gay culture uses the close-up of the penis as an 'affection-object', standing in for identities, as Deleuze argues that the face as an affect-image stands in for the body to which it belongs. Penney develops his arguments through his digital artworks, examining the treatment of 'bodies under glass' in terms of people's uses of gay dating apps on smartphones and the digital relationships between people, bodies, images, screens and the finger-swipe used to dismiss a possible sexual/romantic connection. He suggests that the affect-images most celebrated in the glass screens of gay dating apps might make it more difficult to realise the human desire for affection in digitally facilitated encounters.

'Show Me Your Slugline and I'll Let You Have the Firstlook: Initial Thoughts on the Availability of Digital Screenwriting Tools and Apps' sees Craig Batty examining a very different series of apps and interventions. Batty's area of interest and expertise is the programs and applications relating to the increasingly relevant creative art of scriptwriting. In a culture that celebrates the power of the narrative, storytelling has always been accorded critical importance, but the role of the storyteller becomes immeasurably more complex once it also acts to channel the creative input of actors, directors, sound recordists, designers, location scouts and so on. The scriptwriter works to create the baseline starting point and coordination for all these activities, and it is unsurprising that this complexity requires a rigid adherence to a range of protocols. A diverse range of apps and other digital tools is now available to help writers address format and function, and each program has a different intervention, or combination of interventions, to offer. Addressing this diversity and its impact upon the history and practice of script creation, Batty details his experience of the Firstlook screenplay platform and considers the potential of artistic and pedagogical interventions around peer review and a collaborative engagement with the scriptwriting process.

Scriptwriting is also a central concern of Alan McKee, Anthony Walsh and Anne-Frances Watson's article, 'Using Digitally Distributed Vulgar Comedy to Reach Young Men with Information About Healthy Sexual Development'. Taking as their starting point the premise that public health messages are discounted as being worthy and boring by

many young males aged fourteen to sixteen, and noting that this cohort has access to far less information about healthy sexual development than is available to equivalent-aged young women, the authors seek to explore the potential of digital interventions to achieve breakthrough entertainment education with their target audience. Having established that vulgar comedy is a particularly prized communicative form among young males, and YouTube an especially relevant delivery channel, the article describes a research project that explores the complexities of using this mode of address as a tool for communicating information around healthy sexual development. Although the project reached script-ready stage, the challenges posed by funding the production of funny public health messages predicated upon vulgar comedic and ‘politically incorrect’ approaches indicate that this kind of digital intervention requires more than a well-researched script and a compelling educational argument to be realised in a finished form.

Working with a somewhat older age group (18–26), and this time with same sex-attracted young adults, Kath Albury and Paul Byron’s research focuses upon ‘Queering Sexting and Sexualisation’. Drawing attention to differences in the academic framing of digital media use by same sex-attracted young people (generally positioned as supportive and positive) and heterosexual young people (generally positioned as risky and dangerous), Albury and Byron also highlight the disparity between young people’s everyday acceptance of sexual and intimate pictorial exchange as part of relationship-forming communication, and the construction of such interactions as problematic and potentially illegal by mainstream society and significant cultural agencies (such as law enforcement). Addressing a gap in the research record, Albury and Byron’s article examines practices around user-generated picture-sharing as a normal element within processes of digital intimacy among same sex-attracted young people. Although it does not engage directly with the Deleuzian conceptual framework of affect-images, this article also relates to Tom Penney’s work and echoes that of McKee, Walsh and Watson through its use of an illuminating real-life example of a humorous story around a young man’s reactions to the unauthorised distribution of images that feature him participating in sexual acts.

Donell Holloway, Lelia Green and Carlie Love’s article, “‘It’s All About the Apps’: Parental Mediation of Pre-Schoolers’ Digital Lives’, also investigates an everyday experience that nonetheless challenges and subverts official guidelines and doctrines. The authors focus upon babies’, toddlers’ and pre-schoolers’ use of digital technologies in a cultural environment where some paediatricians and other health professionals recommend that children under two years of age not be allowed to consume any screen-based media whatsoever. Arguing that parents and other caregivers are forming communities of practice in the face of a general regulatory refusal to engage with the realities of daily life, the authors offer a range of examples in which young children’s use of digital technologies intervenes in their everyday experiences with the effect of integrating these infants and toddlers within broader family networks, incorporating them within the rhythms of family life. Far from providing a disengaging and distracting influence, the article suggests that digital media are used by parents and others in thoughtful ways to help children negotiate distance and absence, both in terms of actual absence and when a parent’s attention is temporarily engaged elsewhere. Holloway, Green and Love suggest that these caregivers are using their own expertise in engaging with digital media resources, and their experience of living with and caring for the children implicated within these patterns of digital access, to write new rules of engagement.

Taken together, these articles interrogate the role of digital interventions in everyday life, indicating their subversive and disruptive uses to undermine the established order. In common with other technological innovations, such technologies are generally used

by people who seek to effect change by achieving novel ambitions (McKee et al.) and working in different ways (Ryan). These digital interventions enable participatory action in both the public (Rodan and Mummery) and private (Albury and Byron) spheres, creating communities of like-minded and similarly interested people of more or less lasting duration. They appear particularly suited to innovations in sexual self-expression at a distance (Penney, Albury and Byron) and for younger groups who may be marginalised in terms of discourses around competencies and rights (Holloway et al., McKee et al., Albury and Byron). These digital technologies both prompt and enable new forms of artistic expression (Penney) or existing forms of digital expression by new audiences (Holloway et al.), critically engaging with aspects of the everyday. Digital interventions allow new-generation processes (Batty) and practices (Carlin), and make visible a range of ambiguities and liminalities, offering creative transformations.

Novel perspectives arising from the use of digital materials challenge established theory and conceptual frameworks, such as those around the affective economy (Rodan and Mummery), and construct participatory expertise that informs everyday actions in opposition to the recommendations of accepted authority figures (Albury and Byron, McKee et al., Holloway et al.). They require the newer qualitative research methods, favouring exploration by such techniques as practice-led (Ryan), practice-based (Penney), performative (Carlin) and pedagogically informed collaborative (Batty) approaches. In sum, these interventions enfranchise new populations as digital citizens, especially the very young and audiences formed through using specific apps. The mobility and ubiquity of digital technologies in minority-world liberal democracies also enables engagement around the clock, and in a variety of settings and places from which connected communication would previously have been precluded. In the hands of its engaged practitioners, digital interventions are restructuring the fabric of everyday lives.

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