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## Risk media and the end of anonymity

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## ABSTRACT

Whereas threats from twentieth century 'broadcast era' media were characterised in terms of ideology and 'effects', today the greatest risks posed by media are informational. This paper argues that digital participation as the condition for the maintenance of today's self identity and basic sociality has shaped a new principal media risk of the loss of anonymity. I identify three interrelated key features of this new risk. Firstly, basic communicational acts are archival. Secondly, there is a diminishment of the predictable 'decay time' of media. And, thirdly, both of these shape a new individual and organizational vulnerability of 'emergence' – the haunting by our digital trails.

This article places these media risks in the context of the shifting nature and function of memory and the potential uses and abuses of digital pasts.

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## 1. Introduction

Whereas once media audiences had collective anonymity in their consumption in the golden age of broadcast that defined the twentieth century, in today's digital media ecology, it is users that are made personally accountable. In this paper I argue that it is informational vulnerabilities that constitute the most profound new risk of our consumption and use of media today. Individuals are subject to a new form of informational insecurity, that is entangled in a connective and unbridled public in the pervasive recording and distributing of personal thoughts and acts, a part conscious sharing without sharing, which makes haunting one of the new risks of this age. The already everyday digital comments, consumption and acts, routinely recorded, posted, tagged, tweeted, and liked, make this the most accountable generation in history.

In brief, the definition of 'media ecology' I draw upon here is that used in Hoskins and Tulloch ([9]: 8), namely: 'the media imaginary (how and why media envision the world within a particular period or paradigm and its consequences) and our imaginary of the media of the day (how media are made visible or otherwise in that process of making the world intelligible), in which some ecologies are perceived as inherently more "risky" than others'. The study of media ecologies has a long history,<sup>1</sup> and a survey is beyond the scope of this article. However, it is important to note a number of contributions that have identified key characteristics of a 'new' or 'digital' media ecology [1,11,13,15] particularly in relation to the organic nature of digital networks.

In this article, I argue that it is the loss of anonymity that is the greatest threat from media today. This is not just the commodification of the personal, with each individual's details readily exchanged for access to a range of online services, but that overnight digital participation and exposure became the requisite for the maintenance of self identity and basic sociality. Risk media are defined by the fact that the smartphone has become the locus of us: an extended avatar of the self in terms of messages, relationships, who you know, what web you look at, regularity of contacts, purchases and music tastes – an incomparable social and cultural hub.

The loss of anonymity is a *sociotechnical* risk, namely the enmeshment of the essential and everyday ways in which we are social with our dependency on digital communication devices and infrastructures. And it is precisely because of this enmeshment that it is so difficult to grasp the scale of the loss of anonymity and to forge a new consciousness of and in media.

To these ends I offer a vision of risk media that prompts remembrance of an earlier and much more benign media ecology, through which to illuminate what is at stake in the digital mundane. To achieve this I employ an interdisciplinary lens that mobilises the memory of media as well as highlighting the profound risk to the future of anonymity from shifts in the media of memory. I thus draw on the emergent subfield of 'digital memory studies' [8] and I employ three of its central themes here, namely: (1) everyday media consumption, communication and participation is archival; we knowingly and unknowingly leave digital traces of our selves; (2) there is a diminishment of the predictable 'decay time' [7] of media, that is pre-digital media forms were fairly reliable in their lifespans and the dissipation of memory of a given society, whereas today there is profound uncertainty between the extremes

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of accidental deletion and of the need for a 'right to be forgotten'; (3) both of the former open up a new individual and organizational vulnerability of 'emergence', of being haunted by sociotechnical living.

## 2. Communication and archive

A defining difference with previous media ecologies is that all of these consumption and communicational acts are fundamentally *archival*. Careless yet compulsive connectivity – clicking, swiping, posting, linking, liking, tweeting and all digital acts of the publication and the often indiscriminate sharing of self, ensure that the unrecorded areas of our lives are shrinking fast. It can even be said that the act of recording has become more urgent than experiencing that which is being recorded. The end of anonymity opens up a newly uncertain future in which the archive has eclipsed the individual.

However, all this is not only the consequence of the running away of technology from the bounds of human perception so that it becomes increasingly difficult to fathom the workings of the algorithmic 'technological unconscious' that underpins much of daily life lived online and thus to take any meaningful action to re-secure the self. For a key driver of the end of anonymity is a new public viral culture of a 'right to know', so that all information – individual, organizational, governmental – is seen as fair game. The digitally fostered values of unbridled commentary, open access, freedom of information, the immediacy of instant search, and confessional culture, have increased the value of anonymity whilst at the same time making its attainment impossible. This paradox is one that is a product of our current digital media ecology, as Jill Lepore [10] explains:

In the twentieth century, the golden age of public relations, publicity, meaning the attention of the press, came to be something that many private citizens sought out and even paid for. This has led, in our own time, to the paradox of an American culture obsessed, at once, with being seen and with being hidden, a world in which the only thing more cherished than privacy is publicity. In this world, we chronicle our lives on Facebook while demanding the latest and best form of privacy protection— ciphers of numbers and letters— so that no one can violate the selves we have so entirely contrived to expose.<sup>2</sup>

And it is this comparison with an earlier and defining media ecology that is useful to draw in highlighting the rapidity and the scale of these changes. Thus to make claims of the nature and consequences of risk media and the end of anonymity I explicitly draw comparison with the broadcast media era whose threats posed by media were mostly characterised in terms of ideology (brainwashing), ownership (concentrated in the hands of a few) and 'effects' (copycat violence). Although these threats may still persist in some ways, the fundamental digital risk today is that the user has become accountable for that use.

## 3. Emergence

The relative stability of the broadcast era of media has given way to a new individual and organizational vulnerability of emergence. Emergence I define as: the accidental or deliberate revealing of potentially transcendent missed or hidden or thought deleted images, videos, emails etc. emerging to transform what was known or thought to be known, about a person or organization and their acts. And for an example of the shift in emergence in only a quarter of a century, I just want to recount a short story from 1989.

I started my first university year at Lancaster in the autumn of 1989 when the North-West of England was being culturally shaped through the 'Madchester' music scene that spawned such era-defining bands as Happy Mondays, Inspiral Carpets and The Stone Roses. One student, 'Tom' – lived on my corridor in Halls on campus, and managed to see one of the seminal Stone Roses' gigs that year, with some other 27,000 fans. He took his 'university' girlfriend to the concert as he continued to go out with another girlfriend from his hometown: a relationship that preceded his new student life. Tom didn't negotiate these relationships but merely managed their separation, i.e. his girlfriend at home had no knowledge of his relationship with his 'other' (university) girlfriend.

However, one day I met Tom walking down a Halls' corridor brandishing a national UK tabloid daily (circulation then of over five million). A photograph of a sea of fans at the Stone Roses concert from the day before was spread across the front page. Despite the crowd, clearly discernible at the front was Tom with his arm around his university girlfriend. The separation of his two private relationships was collapsed through the sudden publicness of one of them. 'The game's up' he said. 'She (home girlfriend) didn't even know I was going to the gig. Now the whole world knows. What are the chances of that happening?'

And that is a significant question: what *are* the chances of that happening? The sudden revelation or emergence of Tom's illicit relationship(s) was extremely improbable given the mass media of 1989. That was an era of news media restricted to print, radio and television. And yet, today, connectivity would have made it very difficult for Tom to manage his multiple relationships.

Today, in contrast, the archive eclipses the individual. In this way, a once functional relationship between media and memory has been made dysfunctional. It has long been said that human memory is notoriously fragile without external aid. Hence it has evolved with technological externalization and increased use and reliance on media forms and devices is seen to strengthen and enhance memory. And an array of disciplines, from philosophy to media studies, approach media as a key mechanism of augmenting, extending, and prosthetising human memory. But the digital throws the human-media memory relation into reverse. The self is eclipsed by the externally-held information held and circulating about him or her.

For example, today I can't remember much where I was on the 15 March 2016 or where I travelled or by what means, or what conversations I had with others or with myself, what news I read, or what television programmes or films I watched, and what comments I made in response to my immersion in and uses of the twenty-first century media ecology. Yet the archival record of these activities and much more remains in the array of my digital data traces, left knowingly or unwittingly. These are now circulating, repeating, searchable and sellable by others, accumulating the exchange value of my mediated memory in the digital knowledge economy.

In contrast, my memory of the 15 March 1986, to the extent that it remains and regardless of whether it is accurate or inaccurate, is (still) largely a human and private memory in that my documentation and my sharing of it had comprehensible limits. In that time, I communicated with and consumed media with little prospects of being haunted by these everyday acts. My 1986 mostly human, albeit supplemented by media, memory, has in 2016 been displaced by an algorithmic memory, a memory beyond my imagination and mostly beyond my control. And the pre-internet past is the one that has become something it never was; the media remnants of my 1980's self are no longer safe in their once presumed trajectories of decay and forgetting, being made vulnerable to digital hijacking today, as with scattered faded family photographs suddenly found and scanned and posted and tagged

<sup>2</sup> Jill Lepore, "The Prism: Privacy in an Age of Publicity," *New Yorker*, June 24, 2013, [http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2013/06/24/130624fa\\_fact\\_lepore?currentPage=all&mobify=0](http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2013/06/24/130624fa_fact_lepore?currentPage=all&mobify=0) (accessed May 26, 2014).

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