The Digital Condition and the Reconstitution of the Public(s)

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In the following text, I wish to outline how the public – understood here as the (potential) patrons of cultural institutions – is being reconstituted under the digital condition, and how their agency, expectations and needs differ from those of the public that was constituted under the regime of print and broadcast media to which cultural institutions traditionally catered. I will start by sketching some of the key features of the digital condition and then show how these shape the transformation of the public from a more or less passive/reflective audience to one that plays a range of more active roles, which may include, but frequently also go much further than the passive/reflective role. I will refrain from making specific recommendations, because the ways in which these general structural realities manifest themselves, and the kinds of openings/closures they produce, are highly dependent on local conditions best known to the practitioners on the ground.

Clarification of Terms: Digitisation vs. Digital Conditions

Digitisation is the process by which analogue materials are transformed into digital information. The most obvious example is the scanner, which transforms a physical document into a digital one. This can include multiple processes, as when a text document is first turned into a digital image, and then the image is turned into a digital text, using Optical Character Recognition (OCR) software. Often, these processes employ a combination of automated and manual labour. For example, not even Google managed to automate the turning of book pages during its massive scanning operation (Google Books), but employed a large amount of outsourced labour to turn the pages manually.[1] However, digitisation is not just a question of digitising the archive. Since embodied people live in the physical world, this is an ongoing process in which an increasing number of sensors constantly monitor and translate physical states and processes into

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1   There are numerous art projects and publications that deal with this issue, such as Andrew Wilson (2011) *Workers Leaving the Googleplex*, or Kenneth Goldsmith (2013) 'The Artful Accidents of Google Books', *Page-Turner* blog, *The New Yorker*, 4 December.

digital information, through operations that range from automatically checking for body temperature as people enter a building during a pandemic to modelling climate change based on historical and real-time geophysical data.

The digital condition (or digitality), on the other hand, is a specific set of constraints and possibilities, created by the large number of social processes that use the capacities of digital infrastructures. Thus, the concept of "digital condition" operates on the same level as what media theorists call "print culture": a consistent set of cultural features that shape how we perceive ourselves and the world, and how we act in it (McLuhan, 1962). The focus on media often gives these theories a certain techno-deterministic bias, which is a problematic oversimplification of the relationship between culture and technology.

Rising Complexity: The Case of Design

So, if (digital) technology is not driving this process, then what is? Put simply, the digital condition emerged from the increasing complexity of society, for which digital technologies provide new infrastructures and tools when the old ones cease to work. Those who know how to take advantage of this increased complexity by moulding it according to their specific agendas are empowered, putting pressure on others to similarly incorporate these tools and utilise their possibilities, at the very least in order to keep pace with them. Technology involves both reacting to and increasing social complexity. From a cultural point of view, rising complexity means that the number and diversity of normative positions (broadly speaking, addressing questions relating to what is right or wrong) are increasing, together with the possible relations between them. As a consequence, the amount of social communication that reaches beyond the private realm and enters into societal processes of meaning-making expands sharply, so that new ways of integrating this communication need to be found. In other words, this is both a quantitative (more) and qualitative (different) transformation that has been fed from many sources.

Let me illustrate this increase in complexity by way of an example: the transformation of design as a discipline.[2] As an autonomous field, design originated alongside industrialisation when the division of labour began

2   This section draws on Stalder (2018), pp. 33-38

to separate the activities of planning and design from those of production. It was not until the late nineteenth century that design emerged as a distinct profession, and only in the twentieth century did it begin to seek new forms for the logic inherent in mass production. In the Bauhaus tradition, designers sought to optimise the clearly defined functions of anonymous and endlessly reproducible objects, with an eye to achieving economic efficiency. The architect Louis Sullivan, whose buildings still mark the skyline of Chicago, condensed this new attitude into the famous axiom 'form follows function'. Mies van der Rohe, who also worked as an architect in Chicago in the mid-twentieth century, supplemented this phrase with a slogan of his own: 'less is more'. Both of them stress that the rationality of design, as a process for isolating and improving specific functions, and the efficient use of resources were of utmost importance for modern (industrial) designers. The impact of this approach is still felt today. It was reiterated in the ten principles for good design of Dieter Rams, who led the design department of the consumer products company Braun from 1965 to 1991. His aim was to make products 'useable', 'understandable', 'honest' and 'long-lasting'. According to Rams' guiding principles, 'good design is as little design as possible' (SFMOMA, 2011). For many years, these principles were one of most important sources of inspiration for Jonathan Ive, Apple's lead designer, and the design similarities between some of Apple's most iconic products, such as the iPod, and Rams' iconic designs, such as the famous Braun portable radios, are very evident. This orientation towards the technical and functional promised to solve everyone's problems in a binding and long-term manner, for the inherent material and design qualities of an object were supposed to make it independent from the changing times and from the tastes of consumers. A small number of expert designers created the solutions that others would simply use. It was, in terms of communication, an industrial broadcast model.

Over time, this approach generated strong opposition. At the end of the 1960s, a new generation of designers rebelled against this industrial and instrumental rationality, which was felt to be authoritarian, soulless and reductionist. This was part of a larger rebellion against industrial society and what Herbert Marcuse (1964) called "the one-dimensional man". In movements such as "anti-design" or "radical design", the objectives of the discipline were redefined, and a new formal language was developed. Instead of technical and functional optimisation, recombination – ecological recycling or the postmodern interplay of forms – emerged as a design method and aesthetic strategy. The focus of design shifted from the individual object to its entire

social and material environment. The processes of design and production were opened up precisely in order to encourage the participation of non-designers, in the form of interdisciplinary cooperation with other types of professions or as a way of empowering laymen. Design took on a new mission: rather than ending with the completion of an individual product, it was now supposed to engage with society, which, in the sense of cybernetics, was regarded as a "system" controlled by feedback processes that connected social, technical, and biological dimensions to one another. Design was now supposed to intervene in these feedback loops as a "socially significant activity" that would involve diverse people and positions, while communication would be expanded to encompass all these different positions.

Victor Papanek, the founder of ecological design, took things a step further. For him, design was 'basic to all human activity. The planning and patterning of any act towards a desired, foreseeable end constitutes the design process. Any attempt to separate design, to make it a thing-by-itself, works counter to the inherent value of design as the primary underlying matrix of life' (Papanek, 1972, p. 2). Potentially, all aspects of life could therefore fall under the purview of design. This arose through the desire to oppose industrialism, which was blind to its catastrophic social and ecological consequences, with a new and comprehensive manner of seeing and acting that was unrestricted by economics. In terms of communication, it was a first instance of a "many-to-many" communication, in which horizontal participation was supposed to replace vertical commands.

As these patterns became depoliticised and commercialised during the 1980s, the focus of designing the "lifeworld", that is, social relations, shifted more and more towards designing the "experiential world", that is, individual perceptions, addressing people primarily as atomised consumers building their own personality through brands. This new approach was pioneered by rising consumer brand like Nike, which introduced the concept of flagship stores in 1990. With their elaborate displays, these stores were meant to turn shopping into an experience that the company's executives hoped would radiate outwards and influence how the brand was perceived as a whole, enticing consumers to build their own identity around it. The experiential world could, however, also be conceived in somewhat broader terms, with entire institutions, for example, being designed in such a way as to create a more attractive work environment, thus increasing the commitment of employees. Here, people were regarded as creative producers, barely working, but remaining hyper-productive

anyway, following the role model of the artist. This working procedure became popularised through countless stories about ping-pong tables, gourmet cafeterias and massage rooms in certain offices. "Microdosing", the use of very small doses of psychedelic drugs to enhance individual creativity, served the same purpose, namely, to loosen existing relations between actors (or synapses) and increase the chances of new and surprising relations emerging, thus creating a higher degree of complexity from which new solutions/products could be derived.

Yet the "experiential world" can be expanded even further, for instance when entire cities attempt to make themselves attractive to international clienteles and to compete with others by building spectacular museums or sporting arenas. Cities, as well as a few other central locations, are regularly arranged in such a way as to produce a particular experience. This also means that, on the one hand, ever more sectors of cities need to be mobilised to effect this transformation, while, on the other hand, "undesirable" forms of use are pushed towards the periphery or driven out altogether. Thus, today there is hardly a single area of life to which the strategies and methods of design do not have any access, and this access occurs at all levels. For some time, design has not been a simply visible matter, restricted to material objects; instead, it forms and controls all of the senses. Cities, for example, have come to be understood as composed not just of physical, social or visual spaces, but also of "sound spaces"; accordingly, they have been reconfigured with the goal of modulating their various noises. Yet design is no longer just a matter of objects, processes, or even experiences. It has expanded even further, as a form of reproductive medicine, and has even become involved with the biological foundations of life ("designer babies"), and, further still, with the entire geophysical circulation of the planet ("geoengineering").

All of this involved more and more human and non-human actors in a process of (re)negotiating their relationships, which increased the complexity of operations, as more and more actors were now interlinking their experiences, desires and modes of action. They were no longer seen, or saw themselves, as recipients of ready-made, one-size-fits-all solutions, but rather as active participants in the co-creation of the world.

To manage this growing number of actors involved in the design process, new methods were developed which, in one way or another, sought to organise a wide range of positions through large-scale, horizontal, open communication, first physically (assemblies, workshops, neighbourhood associations, etc.)

and then increasingly digitally (email list, online forums, digitally-assisted decision-making tools, etc.) with many different combinations of the two modes. In turn, expectations changed as to how the public was supposed to be included, even if that inclusion was sometimes more superficial than substantive in practice (Crouch, 2004). Design is, of course, just one instance of this expansion of social communication and meaning-making.[3]

Existing institutions of meaning-making – such as broadcast media or exhibition spaces – were all built on the premise that a small number of specialists select what a large number of people will see and decide how the materials are contextualised. Given the inevitable constraints of time and resources experienced by these media, the selection process necessarily had to be biased, selecting certain events, objects, narratives and experiences, while considering others to be deviant, irrelevant or, at best, private. In parallel with the increased scale and scope of social communication, and with more and more people participating in (semi-)public debates, the criticisms of this selection mechanism and the institutions that embodied it grew louder. Many of these criticisms were related precisely to these biases of selection, with more and more groups no longer agreeing to be edited out or written off. In 1988, the feminist art collective Guerilla Girls drew attention to the extreme bias towards the male gaze in art history by producing posters and stickers which famously asked 'Do women have to get naked to get into the Met Museum?' pointing out that fewer than 5% of the artists exhibited are women but more than 85% of all the nudes are female (Guerilla Girls, 2020).

While many institutions showed themselves to be resistant to change, a new communicative and highly different landscape opened up outside them: exuberant, chaotic and decentralised, these new forms of communication self-consciously reflected the views of their makers, rather than expressing some assumed universal hierarchy of values. Beginning with independent publishing and community access television in the 1970s, the range of voices expanded considerably, even if they often remained contained within relatively closed niches. But a new culture of self-communication emerged that rapidly expanded as the Internet provided a new infrastructure that could overcome many of the technical and economic limitations of previous self-communication efforts. It became massive in scale and kept growing. Between roughly 1995 and 2010, depending on content and context, this new communication

3   For a more complete treatment of this process, see Stalder (2018).

environment became normal and the digital condition became dominant. Form a cultural point of view, a major new challenge arose. The problem was no longer whether or not one was able to speak in public (the new digital infrastructure had lowered this hurdle significantly), but rather how to organise these massive and chaotic flows of information into something that could approximate culture, that is to say, shared meaning. And, since this information was no longer processed centrally (say, by a newsroom editorial board), new patterns of organisation have emerged that directly shape the types of publics which our cultural institutions encounter now.

Patterns and Publics

The first of these patterns I shall call *referentiality*, that is, the creation of a personal system of reference. It has become the ubiquitous and generally accessible method of ordering all the many things that each person encounters. Initially, this happens simply by drawing attention to certain things, which are thereby claimed – at least implicitly – to be important. With every uploaded picture on Instagram, every Twitter message, every blog post, every forum entry, every status update, users do precisely this; they communicate to others: 'Look, I think this is important!'. Filtering and meaning assignment are nothing new in themselves. What is new is that both of these functions are no longer performed primarily by specialists in editorial offices, museums, or archives; instead, they have become everyday requirements for large segments of the population, regardless of whether or not they have the material and cultural resources needed to accomplish this task (Stalder, 2018, p. 72).

Given the deluge of information that now surrounds us on a daily basis, any form of selection, any focusing of attention, is a productive accomplishment – no matter how unimportant each of these micro-actions (a like here, a forward there, an image taken and shared, a text relayed) may seem in isolation. The benefit of these actions is that they pick out elements from the uniform swirl of cultural material. This is done by using a resource that cannot be duplicated, that stands outside the world of information and that is unalterably limited for each individual: their own lifetime. Every status update that is not created by a machine means that someone has invested their time (even if it is only a second) in order to point out one particular phenomenon – and not another. Thus, these evaluations acquire their relevance by combining what is available in abundance (information) with what is ultimately scarce (one's own

lifetime). In this way, all these references, as unremarkable as they might be for outsiders, are thus brought into a concrete context of meaning that also (co-) determines one's own relationship to the world and one's subjective position in it. Often these evaluations of information are made only casually and have little half-life. Yet, Internet users evaluate information not just once, but repeatedly. The evaluations add up and make connections between the many things to which attention is drawn. This is how paths are drawn through the clutter. Phenomena that could potentially be found in many contexts are brought together in just one single, concrete context. In this way, fields of attention, systems of reference and contexts of meaning are established.

Because organising material by way of producing a stream of references is a way to both make sense of the world and to position oneself within it, viewing, thinking and sharing are brought very close together. In other words, whereas the public used to be mainly occupied with viewing and thinking – the classic silent visitors to a museum – many people now expect to be able to do all three things at the same time. Thus, cultural institutions need to think not only about what to present and how to present it, as well as about what kind of supporting material they create, but also about how they can support the public's desire to share this information according to their own way of seeing it. They must allow visitors to transform the materials that they encounter, creating the form of sharing that is most relevant to them and their communities.

Orienting oneself alone in a complex environment is impossible. Orientation, as well as agency, can only emerge in exchange with others, within a larger framework. This framework, in turn, is essentially held together by what I call *communal formations*: associations of people who organise themselves on a voluntary basis in order to pursue common goals. They emerge in a particular field of practice, are characterised by informal but structured exchange, are focused on enabling new knowledge, as well as new forms of action, and are bound together by a shared interpretation of their own practice. It is this last point in particular – the collaborative creation, preservation and modification of a frame of reference in which actions, processes and objects acquire a particular meaning and commitment – that constitutes the central role of collaborative formations. These formations, not the individuals, are the actual subjects that produce culture, in other words shared meaning.

On the everyday level of communicative self-creation, as well as in the shaping of a personal horizon of meaning – in countless streams, updates and timelines

in the social mass media – the most important resource is the attention of others, their feedback and the resulting mutual recognition. Even if this recognition is only effected in the form of a quickly clicked like, the smallest unit that assures the sender that there is a recipient somewhere. Users experience the constitution of both uniqueness and a sense of community (in which a person can be perceived as a person) as simultaneous and mutually dependent processes. Performing these actions millions of times and already almost unconsciously (because they are practised every day), people engage in an interpersonal relationship that no longer corresponds in any way to the liberal contrast between individual and society, between personal identity and group identity. Instead of conceiving the two processes (the emphatic affirmation of the individual or his or her dissolution within the homogeneous group) as mutually exclusive, the new formations presuppose that the production of difference (announcement: this is new!) and the production of commonality (response: we like this!) take place simultaneously (Stalder, 2018, p. 87).

Participation in a collaborative formation is voluntary, but it is not altruistic. On the contrary, an important motivation is to gain access to the field of practice and resources opened up by a formation. A collaborative formation, after all, does more than simply draw the attention of individual members to each other. Through shared cultural production, it also structures how members perceive the world and how they can design themselves and their agency within it. It is thus a cooperative mechanism that simultaneously filters, interprets and constitutes.

For cultural institutions, it is therefore important to see the public not just as a mass of individualised patrons, but as separate parts of many different, overlapping communities, all of which have their own different ways of understanding and making sense of the materials presented (insofar as they are interested in them). It is crucial to promote links between these different ways of understanding the offerings of the cultural institution, which exist in addition to, and sometimes in conflict with, the perspective promoted by the institutions themselves. The role of the institutions thus changes from that of purveyors of information and knowledge to that of a platform designed to generate and relate all kinds of interpretations to one another. This does not mean subscribing to a "post-factual" anything goes attitude, but acknowledging that, in a complex world, there are only partial, situated views and that a more comprehensive understanding does not come from distant objectivity, but from multi-perspectivity.

Last but not least, *algorithmicity* refers to those aspects of cultural processes that are (pre)ordered by machines. Algorithms transform the unmanageable amounts of data and information that now shape many areas of everyday life into dimensions and formats that can be grasped by human perception. It is impossible – for one person alone, as well as for a community, no matter how large – to read billions of websites in a way that makes sense. That's why we depend on offerings like the Google Search Algorithm, which helps us to reduce the flood of data (Big Data) to a set and translate it into those formats that humans can understand (Small Data). In this way, they make human understanding and action possible in the first place under the digital condition and influence it in an ambivalent way: on the one hand, they create new dependencies by pre-sorting the (informational) world and making it accessible; and, on the other hand, they ensure autonomy by creating the conditions for personal agency.

For cultural institutions, this is the most difficult element of the reconstituted public to shape directly, because – outside their own archival databases – they do not have access to the data sources and the algorithms that organise them. So, it is at least very important to be aware of how algorithms constitute and transform the publics all the time by keeping up to date with how the Google Search Algorithms change over time, and with how Facebook and other social media change their own filtering in, at times, rather drastic ways.
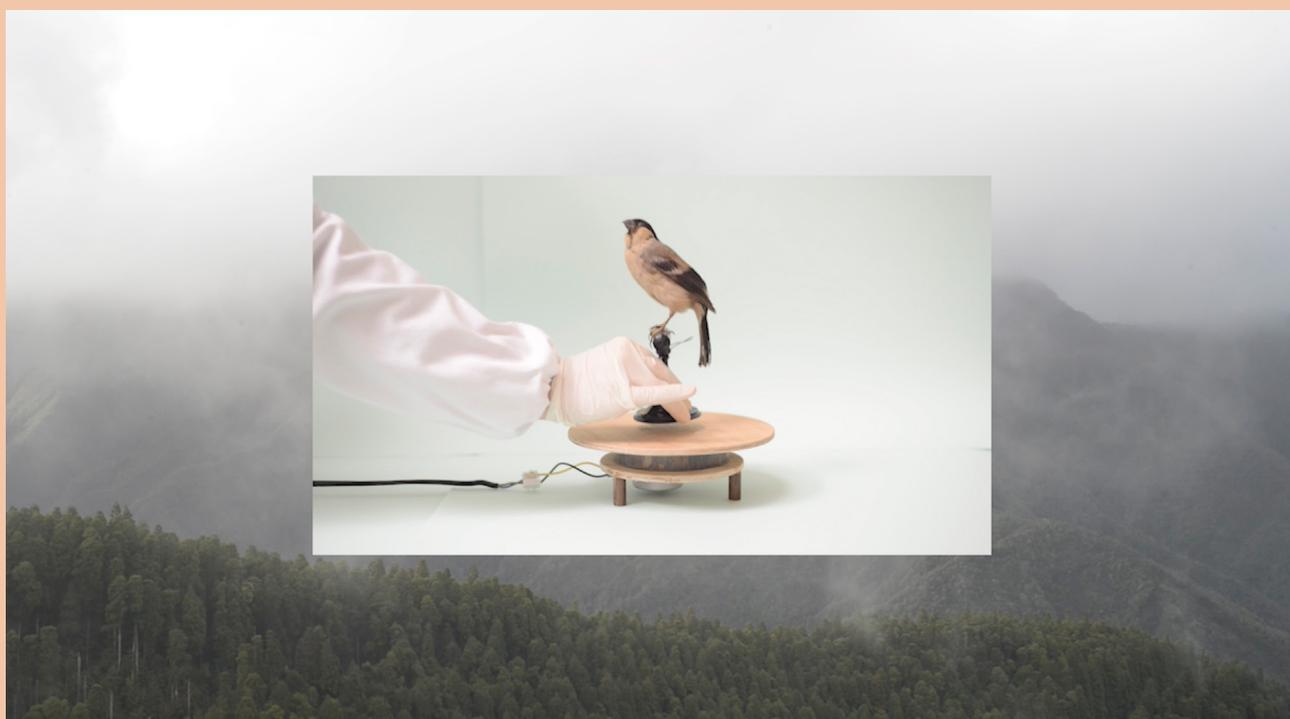
Conclusion

"The public" has never been a natural occurrence, but a social formation that was created by (mass) media and that has undergone numerous structural transformations in response to the techno-economic changes in the media landscape (Habermas, 1989). What we are experiencing now is another profound transformation into a networked public sphere, vastly more fragmented, but also more interconnected and dynamic, than the previous one, which was centred around the mass media delivering the same information to a large number of people. While the situation is currently still very fluid, we can already see that the three patterns which shape the constitutions of new publics are reinforcing one another. Helping visitors to see the institution as providing materials which they themselves can then share, work with and transform will influence how the algorithms read the institutions, because,

by and large, these algorithms are geared towards promoting materials that generate further engagement. And what better materials could there be to engage with than the materials offered by cultural institutions?

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