TL;DR: TEMPORALITY SHIFTS IN DIGITAL CULTURE

Stacey May Koosel
Estonian Academy of Arts

Abstract

Temporality is an influential aspect of digital culture, both in the design and understanding the effects of digital technologies. This essay probes ideas about temporal and spatial ordering online from the viewpoint of media ecology, digital ethnography and the philosophy of technology.

Keywords: Digital Culture, Media Ecology, Temporality

The term 'TL;DR' is Internet-jargon for 'too long didn't read.' It's a dismissive response to a text that was too long or not interesting enough to read. Cultural significance can be derived from the new term (coined in 2003) as an example of the demand for a certain style of communication, a need for instant satisfaction and the current state of attention spans. In the information deluge of the digital age attention spans are getting shorter and communication styles are adapting to our new technologies (Turkle 2011, Carr 2010). Media theorists attribute this change in literacy, as a response to information overload. When an environment overwhelms the senses, we revert to aural, spatial and visual styles of information processing as well as pattern recognition.

The subject of temporality factors in on many different levels when dealing with digital culture. Online time or 'virtual time' can differ from offline 'real world' time, as online or 'virtual time' can be asynchronous. That is to say that online time can be more easily manipulated, artificially constructed and fragmented than offline time. The study of temporality in digital culture can also dig deep into the Husserlian notions of time, dealing more with the consciousness of time itself rather than the empirical concept of time (Dreyfus 2006). Temporal awareness online is often a by-product of design, by software that guides temporal and spatial constructs that help create meaning in the virtual, online environment.

The Paradoxically Ephemeral Aspects of Digital Culture

Temporality also plays a part in the discourse on memory, narrative, identity and technology. Particularly when attempting to draw connections and trace

phenomenological investigations into our new media ecologies. It is with lightening speed that artifacts of digital culture can mutate from the pinnacle of technological progress and cultural attention to obsolete technology that is long forgotten from the collective memory. For example early Internet phenomena such as, JenniCam (1996 – 2003), MUDs (multi-user dungeons) and AOL's 19,000 Chatrooms in 1997. These three examples were popular culture sensations of their day, yet now have all but vanished from the Internet but more tellingly from collective memory.

Why have our new forms of entertainment and communication lost the ability to withstand the tests of time and stay in collective memory? Digital culture seems to leave a lighter foot print on our collective memory as it is easily lost, forgotten or made redundant. Which leaves us with a paradox, where the technology exists to archive, store and easily retrieve digital content – but the demand for browsing old digital content as entertainment does not exist the same way as other (older) forms of media. Old digital content is not consumed the same way as television show reruns, old films, 'golden oldies' music or even old images and books.

The idea of validating the relevance of information through the use of time stamps or even more subtle clues such as webpage design elements – can help an online user determine the reliability and relevance of information found online. The study of digital identity is a sub-category of digital culture, that can look specifically at the discourse in the relationship between the offline Internet user and the online manifestation of virtual existence. Online communication is a hybrid of many offline styles of communication, including visual communication.

Often online writing is more ephemeral with more similarities in time and space to spoken conversation rather than written communication, traditional story telling and literature genres. "The momentary writing of new social media loses the slow and deep aspects of traditional written thought, but gains the immediacy and vibrancy of momentary speech." (Wittkower 2012) The written form of communication used online has been referred to as 'spoken written communication'
(Kacandes 2001) or 'secondary orality' (Ong 1982). Social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter have changed the way we think and communicate with others both online and offline.

Marshall McLuhan observed in his study of the effects of media on culture, that the old medium becomes the content of the new medium. (McLuhan 1964) Much like the written word became content for books, books became the content for plays and theater became content for films, films became content for television – and all these older, established forms of media became content for the Internet. The difference between the old more traditional forms of electronic media and digital media, is temporal and spatial ordering. (Hine 2000)

For example, if one wants to attend a play at the theater, or watch a program on television – there is a fixed time and place sequence to be able to catch the show. Traditionally the television show starts at a fixed time on a fixed channel, and the television itself is located in a fixed location.

Internet users creates meaning out of the use of multiple temporal and spatial orderings to create social contexts. Temporal and spatial ordering helps Internet users tell where and when they are, which helps orient them to others inhabiting the same digital environment. (Hine 2000) The construction of social contexts online mimic offline contexts in many cases, however the nature of the medium does call for innovation and adaptation. The phenomena of dead websites or HTTP 404, 'page not found' and broken links are indicators of websites that once existed but no longer exist, or are no longer updated. Information on the Internet has a lifecycle, the birth is the initial distribution of information and the death can be either information that is no longer current and updated, or information which no longer can be accessed.

Relevancy of information, identity and community online are communicated in connection to spatial and temporal context. The timestamp has become an integral part of social and interactive media web-design, as it shows the time and date that a particular story or comment was written on a news site, or a post was posted on a blog or status was updated on a social networking site. The timestamp creates temporal and spatial meaning to communication that would otherwise just be text out of context. Douglas Coupland, the Canadian artist and author of the infamous 1991 novel "Generation X: Tales for an Accelerated Culture" has said that the difference between art and writing is that the written word takes place in time and art takes place in space.

Time Out of Mind
Temporality shifts are a marked characteristic of digital culture and contemporary society, but it is also important to also recognize the changes in how time has been restructured in new historical perspective as well as online environments.

Luciano Floridi, Professor of Philosophy and Ethics of Information at the University of Oxford and the Oxford Internet Institute has explained how our new digital technology has reshaped human reality in what he calls the fourth revolution the 'infosphere'. According to Floridi, some six thousand years after the onset of the written word, the digital revolution has created a new form of history, which he calls 'hyperhistory'. As Floridi explains there are three stages of information and communication technology. In the first stage (prehistory) there were no ICTs, in the second stage ICTS record and transmit data, but in the third 'hyperhistory' stage ICTS not only record and transmit but also process data autonomously – and societies become fundamentally dependent on these autonomous functions. (Floridi 2012)

Much like Manuel Castells wrote about in his trilogy of books on the 'The Information Age' in the mid to late 1990s which traced the history of production, power and experience from a sociological perspective, Floridi also outlines communication history but from the point of view of the philosophy of technology. The philosophy of technology ultimately seeks to make sense out of conveyed worlds and attached meanings. (Ruin 2011)The increasingly impermeable relationship of man and communication technology have created a hybrid of human existence, that transcend many assumed understandings and ideas of self and community, time, temporality and space.

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