Big Data as Drama

Wendy Hui Kyong Chun

BIG DATA AS DRAMA

BY WENDY HUI KYONG CHUN

To comprehend the difference medium makes, this article proposes the following: Because of changes in how we (humans and machines) read and write, we are now characters in a universe of dramas putatively called Big Data. This universe, which comprises endless prequels and sequels, is coproduced transnationally by corporations and states through intertwining databases of actions and unique identifiers. Our roles change constantly because of evolving plotlines determined by actions of others like us (people who like us and who are determined to be like us). As characters, we are never singular, but singular-plural; I am YOU.

As characters, we are not—nor do we have to be—marionettes; also we do not have to accept the current terms of our deployment. Indeed, by acknowledging and engaging the wonderful creepiness of networks, we can displace this series of dramas with another, in which we play with the myriad and constant actions necessary to maintaining networks. To do so, we need a politics and theory of networked actions-as-speech because, in this series our actions—or more precisely, our mainly nonconscious or habitual ones—count more than our words. Constantly captured and compared to others, our moves determine past and future narratives. The goal: to move this drama away from preemption and predictable yet rampant consumption towards political contestation and sustainable habituation.

To help develop such a politics and theory, this article, which revisits themes from my *Updating to Remain the Same: Habitual New Media*, outlines the rise of this universe and a possible way forward through repetition and publicity.[1] Revealing how new media's democratic promise—universal participation—has become the grounds for its threat—ubiquitous surveillance—this argument highlights the gap between participation and democracy, speech and empowerment. Refusing notions of privacy that reduce it to a form of house arrest, this article emphasizes the public quality of network exchanges and articulates the need for public rights, rather than domesticity. It ends with the work of DREAM activists, who risk everything to occupy public space by repeating and embracing collective actions.

New media promised to end mass media by dissolving the mass: by replacing the mass with the new and the YOU, for new media is a function of YOU: N(YOU) media. New media relentlessly emphasizes YOU, from Youtube to Facebook's constant inquiry: "What's on your mind?" McLuhan's (in)famous declaration—that the medium in the electronic age is the mess/age or mass/age—no longer holds: in the digital age, the medium is YOU.

This YOU—this loss of mass identity and embrace of singular yet plural individuality—grounds new media's alleged revolutionary potential. John Perry Barlow's legendary "Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace," which coincided with the "Day in Cyberspace" event in 1996, encapsulates this nicely. Addressing "governments of the Industrial World, you weary giants of flesh and steel," he states:

> I come from Cyberspace, the new home of Mind. On behalf of the future, I ask you of the past to leave us alone. You are not welcome among us. You have no sovereignty where we gather. We in cyberspace . . . are creating a world that all may enter without privilege or prejudice accorded by race, economic power, military force, or station of birth. We are creating a world where anyone, anywhere may express his or her beliefs, no matter how singular, without fear of being coerced into silence or conformity.[2]

This declaration, which described the Internet as "cyberspace," a fictional concept coined by William Gibson in 1983, defined it as a free and fearless space in which race/gender/class/sexuality/power did not matter.[3] From the perspective of 2015—in the light of Edward Snowden's revelations and the rise of Big Data—Barlow's vision seems hopelessly naive; but this vision was naive (perhaps deliberately so) in the mid-1990s. (We have yet to fully grapple with the fact that the Internet, a technology that had existed for decades, became new in the mid- to late 1990s, when it became conflated with "old" science fiction, which it barely resembled.) Dismissing this vision because it does not or did not coincide with so-called reality is hardly insightful: Snowden, after all, revealed in *CitzenFour* that he became a whistleblower because he loved this Internet, in which children allegedly were treated with as much respect as adult experts. So why has the vision of the Internet, which has always been fictional, carried such weight and how does it relate to the transformation of the web into a series of poorly gated communities?

The idea that silence and conformity indicate coercion is linked to a long-standing critique of mass media, from both the right and the left. This critique, most pertinently to this forum and to the English Institute conference on medium that inspired it, responds to changes that mass media has made to the very declension of the term medium. Media as a singular plural, "the media," coincides with the emergence of mass media in the early twentieth century. The OED definitions of mass media and media are almost identical:

> [M]edia, n.2 1. The main means of mass communication, *esp.* newspapers, radio, and television, regarded collectively; the reporters, journalists, etc., working for organizations engaged in such communication. Also, as a count noun: a particular means of mass communication. Cf. MEDIUM *n.* 4d, MASS MEDIA *n.*[4]
>
> Mass media, n. With *sing.* or *pl.* concord (usu. with *the*): the main means of mass communication, such as television, radio, and newspapers, considered collectively.[5]

Mass communications—radio, television, and newspapers—proliferate channels while also distilling message, audience, and meaning, for media as singular plural consolidates the various meanings of medium.

Derived from the Latin term medium ("middle, centre, midst, intermediate course, intermediary"), medium lies in the middle: the median.[6] At the same time, it means (now obscurely) "a geometric or arithmetic mean, an average," and further the very quality of being average: the happy medium, the epitome of moderation and compromise.[7] This quality of being medium seemingly infects the medium, making it also what mediates: the "a person or thing which acts as an intermediary," hence medium of exchange/circulation (from money to electricity).[8] Mass media combines the senses of medium as circulation, mean and median, while also making it the mode, where the mode is the most frequent number in a given set. The notion of "mass media" as a monolith that disseminates a "mass message" depends on a conflation of mean, median, and mode. Mass, presumably an adjective of media (media as sheer abundance, as massive), moves from modifying the mode of dissemination to describing the product of this dissemination. Mass media produces the mass as "a dense aggregation of objects [subjects] having the appearance of a single, continuous body,"[9] or the masses as "the generality or majority of mankind,"[10] happy or not; hence Siegfried Kracauer's influential diagnosis of the effects of mass media as: "[A] system which is indifferent to variations of form [that] leads necessarily to . . . the fabrication of masses of workers who can

be employed and used uniformly throughout the world."[11] Mass media is intimately linked with Fordism and the erasure of difference. It is against this backdrop that new media appears as empowering and as "solving" the problem of mass media: the production of a uniform mass that listens, rather than creates.

These notions of participation as fundamentally empowering and difference as democratic also underlie the literary and cultural studies formulations of writerly resistance. Roland Barthes most famously described the writerly text as an "ideal" text in which "the networks are many and interact, without any one of them being able to surpass the rest . . . the codes it mobilizes extend *as far as the eye can reach*, they are indeterminable . . . the systems of meaning can take over this absolutely plural text, but their number is never closed, based as it is on the infinity of language."[12] Barthes further describes the writerly text as converting readers from consumers to producers of texts: one does not choose between meanings, but rather writes the text as one interprets it. Although Barthes argued that the writerly text did not yet exist, he viewed connotation as a way into the limited plurality of actually existing texts. Stuart Hall's notion of communication as encoding/decoding similarly explores the possibly empowering role of difference and audience interaction. Hall revealed that, even within mass media systems designed to reproduce set meanings, viewing/receiving/reading requires and produces difference. Encoding does not equal decoding, for receivers do not simply repeat the messages disseminated. Rather, Hall argued that communication is a process and that receivers constantly produce readings that differ from the encoded message (Figure 1).
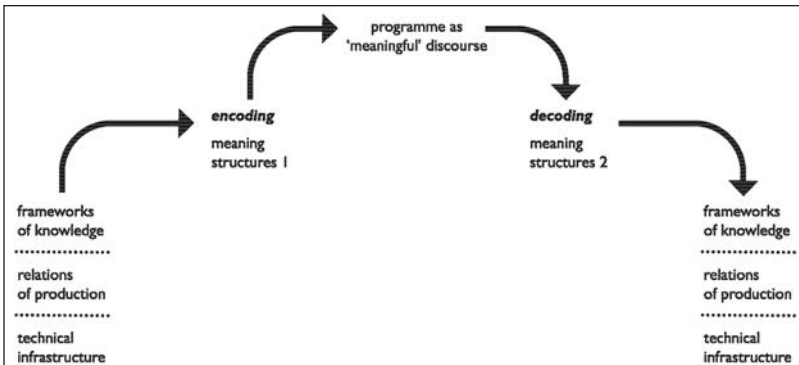

Figure 1. Stuart Hall's diagram of Decoding/Encoding.
Redrawn by Gabrielle Seungyeun Jung.

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His point was far more subtle than difference equals resistance—most differing decodings support hegemonic meaning—however, he saw in difference the possibility for opposition. In particular:

> [I]t is possible for a viewer perfectly to understand both the literal and the connotative inflection given by a discourse but to decode the message in a *globally* contrary way. He or she detotalises the message in the preferred code in order to retotalise the message within some alternative framework of reference. This is the case of the viewer who listens to a debate on the need to limit wages but "reads" every mention of the "national interest" as "class interest." He or she is operating with what we must call an *oppositional code*.[13]

This oppositional code and alternative frames of reference not anticipated within the hegemonic system were, for Hall, moments of crisis, which could lead to real political change because they lay outside of expected meanings.

For many reasons, hypertext and the Internet more generally have been framed as literalizing Barthes and poststructuralism.[14] Clearly, such assessments flatten the richness of Hall's and Barthes's theories—and they do them a grave disservice by offering technological solutions to political problems. They do, however unintentionally, point to certain blind spots in the valorization of writing and difference, for the current Internet has revealed the gap between participation and democracy, participation and equality: we all allegedly post and speak and the world is not yet right. Indeed, the Internet is filled with vitriol and coercion, and the conflation of diversity of opinion with democracy has led to a bizarre situation in which hate speech becomes evidence of democratic engagement. As Wendy Brown points out, participation grounds neoliberalism's challenge to democracy: we participate in our own undoing.[15] Further, as the rest of this article elaborates, new media runs on differences. Algorithms need mistakes—deviations from expected or already known results—in order to learn. Singular events or crises are thus not exceptions, but rather opportunities to improve: they feed the algorithm. Deviations are encouraged, rather than discouraged; deviant decoding makes better encoding possible. Constant participation grounds surveillance. The erasure of the separation between reading and writing—reading as a writerly process—has not liberated, but rather domesticated.

Consider, for example, what happens when you read a book on Kindle. On a Kindle, your highlights are tabulated in order to create lists of the most highlighted texts and in order to let you know how

many others have highlighted the same page. The last page you have read is stored, as well as annotations. The time you spend on a page can be easily tracked.[16] New media devices fundamentally change the nature of reading, for a computer reads by writing elsewhere. Our networks, as I argue more thoroughly in *Updating to Remain the Same: Habitual New Media*, work by leaking. We all download each other's messages, which only some of our machines can or do decode. Without this open exchange of information, there would be no communication—storing all these traces, however, is another story (indeed, the grounds of the drama "Big Data").

This dissemination makes what was once a personal or private act, a public one. If D. A. Miller could most famously argue that, no matter how much "like" a character a reader might be, there is a fundamental and ontological difference because a reader reads "in private":

> [T]he novel-reading subject can never resemble Dickens's characters, conspicuously encased yet so transparent that they are always inside-out, because the novel-reading subject as such has no outside. However much this subject inclusively sees, he is never seen in turn, invisible both to himself (he is reading a novel) and to others (he is reading it in private).[17]

This difference is no longer in place. The subject is not invisible to herself or to others. The novel-reading subject has turned inside-out—a public rather than a private subject.

This reversal does more than expose the reader; it fundamentally changes the nature of political action, for it inverts the metaphorical grounding of liberal democracy. As Thomas Keenan has argued, the window "implies a theory of the human subject as a theory of politics," based on whether the subject is in front of or behind the window:

> Behind it, in the privacy of home or office, the subject observes that public framed for it by the window's rectangle, looks out and understands prior to passing across the line it marks—the window is this possibility of permeability—into the public. Behind it, the individual is a knowing—that is, seeing, theorizing—subject. In front of it, on the street, for instance, the subject assumes public rights and responsibilities, appears, acts, intervenes in the sphere it shares with other subjects.[18]

Keenan troubles this neat separation of the private theorizing subject from the public actor by asking: "[W]hat comes through a window?"[19] How does the light, which makes human sight possible, also disrupt

the sight of the one who would voyeuristically look outside? But the situation now is oddly reversed: political actors are now increasingly framed as private subjects—it is celebrities and corporations who really act—and private subjects now are never alone, never silent. The end of this silent subject has troubling implications.

Jean Baudrillard's seemingly perverse critique of critiques of mass media makes these implications clear. Baudrillard, in *In the Shadow of the Silent Majorities* and "The Masses: The Implosion of the Social in the Media," argues that the strength of the masses lies in their silence. Rather than taking the silence of the masses (the so-called silent majority) as a problem to be fixed, he views this nonresponse as a form of resistance: a strategic disappearance that reacts to the demand to be liberated, rational subjects—to be enlightened—by refusing choice and rationality altogether.[20] The masses, he argues, are an "opaque but equally translucent reality."[21] They are anonymous, innumerable and unnameable. Although the masses—the majority—are constantly poked and prodded (surveyed and measured), they are fundamentally unknown and unknowable because they are a black hole: "[U]ltimately the appeal to the masses has always gone unanswered. They do not radiate; on the contrary, they absorb all radiation from the outlying constellations of State, History, Culture, and Meaning. They are inertia, the strength of inertia, the strength of the neutral."[22] They lie outside representation. Again, this absorption—this indifference—is a positive strategy. It is impossible for the masses to be alienated, because this silence indicates their refusal to be subjects: "[Silence] is an absolute weapon. No one can be said to represent the silent majority, and that is its revenge. . . . [N]o longer being (a) subject, *they can no longer be alienated*" (emphasis in original).[23] In other words, the strength of the masses—themselves a medium (called into being by media)—the strength of mass medium—is their lack of verifiable reception: their lack of vocal participation.

Whether or not one agrees with Baudrillard—and there is certainly a lot to disagree with, especially with respect to his conflation of indifference and silence (the mass watching of a football is hardly silent)—silence as a mocking strategy, as a positive brutality, is arguably now impossible, precisely due to the constant measures for testing that Baudrillard dismisses as incapable of capturing the masses, because they are on the side of simulation and not representation. Silence is now impossible not because of the implosion of the social in the media, but rather because of the implosion of the media in the social, that is, the rise of social media in which reading is no longer private

but tracked, in which your silence is constantly betrayed by people like you because the medium again is no longer the mass but YOU. In other words, silence is now impossible, not only because we are constantly being captured, but also because we are constantly being compared to people who "like us" and who are like us. What matters is not what you say, but what YOU cannot not say, even when you are silent, for YOU are always plural in your singularity. Again, YOU are now characters in a series of dramas called Big Data.

<div align="center">II. NETWORK ANALYTICS, OR THE REVENGE OF THE VALLEY GIRL</div>

YOU is never simply singular, but also plural, which is why YOU is a particularly shifty shifter in English. This singular plurality grounds network analytics, which treats individuals in relation to, that is "like," others. Because of this, the world is becoming analog, and a metaphorical travesty of the English language—the reduction of the "real world" to analogy, based on the existence and erasure of analog computers—is becoming literally true. Big Data—in its most popular current form as a glorified form of network analytics, used by corporations such as Netflix, Target, and FICO—mines our data not simply to identify who we are (this, given our cookies and our tendency to customize our machines is very easy), but to identify us in relation to others "like us."

Friends and their actions are clearly used to determine not only our social networks, but also the strength of our ties. As Taina Bucher has shown, the Facebook algorithm keeps track of our various automated and nonautomated interactions in order to refine its mapping of us.[24] This mapping is somewhat transparent to us; however, it is arguably not what is most revealing or important. Network analytics does not simply draw connections between people already known to each other, but strangers who are determined to be virtual neighbors.

Consider in this light Netflix's use of collaborative filtering to recommend films to users.[25] This is no easy task because, as Mung Chiang explains in *Networked Life*, its database is both very big and sparse: There are millions of subscribers and films; at the same time, very few people actually rate films. To improve its recommendation system, Netflix famously issued a challenge: it offered a large chunk of its database and a lot of money to whomever could improve its recommendation system by ten percent.[26] The winning algorithm employed the average rating, factors to compensate for user and movie bias and, most importantly, it created "neighborhoods" based on the relationship

between films and users. Intriguingly, in calculating a neighborhood, what mattered were both strong likes and dislikes; the neighborhood predictor relies on similarities and differences, and on where one deviates most from the norm. This use of the term "neighborhood" is telling and reveals once more the transformation of the Internet into a series of gated communities. The segregation of film users into neighborhoods based on strong likes and dislikes assumes that neighborhoods are forms of voluntary segregation—that you reside with people "like you," whose actions preempt and shape your own. This is redlining on an entirely different level and, as I've elaborated elsewhere, network analytics engage in discrimination "under cover" of seemingly neutral proxies that target intersections of race, class, gender and sexuality. These algorithms make no attempt at desegregation, at expanding one's point of view by exposing people to things that are radically different.

Importantly, these prospective algorithms were tested by hindcasting—they were evaluated on their ability to predict the past. The Netflix challenge offered teams a training set, a probe set to test this training; a quiz set that was unknown but could be queried once a day; and a final test set to determine the prize. There is a perhaps perverse problem of verifiability embedded within systems that are based on verification, for there is no way to determine how effective these systems really are. How many users, for instance, would have ordered a DVD regardless of Netflix's recommendation? That is, as Oscar Gandy Jr. has argued in relation to systems designed to preempt terrorist actions, there is no way to judge how many false positives a system produces.[27] In a system designed to preempt action, it is impossible to know how many have been falsely detained or falsely denied good rates for health insurance, for in this system, the proof is that there is no proof. These systems, as Gandy points out, are about efficiency, not justice.

Intriguingly, Netflix is not deploying the winning algorithm in all its complexity, but rather using Principal Component Analysis (PCA) to recommend films. It can do this because users increasingly stream films and thus provide much more information to its database—when they pause, when they gorge, and so forth. PCA allows Netflix to simplify its calculations by producing axes, which can then be potentially deciphered into categories such as violence, etcetera. By valuing user actions over their (non-)existent ratings, this system and others like it, as theorists such as Antionette Rouvroy have pointed out, devalue language: they value actions over words. The body, it is presumed, never lies.[28]

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Crucially, this body is never singular, but plural, and this plurality weds singular actions to probable actions, that is, collective habits. Within this mass of neighborhood actions, no one action goes uncorrelated.

<center>III. BIG DATA: HABITS AND CHARACTERISTICS</center>

So what is Big Data? We are told, over and over again, that Big Data defines our era. According to IBM, if the twentieth century was the era of Big Science, the twenty-first is the era of Big Data: in 2014, 2.5 quintillion bytes of data were produced every day and this number is expected to grow exponentially.[29] As Viktor Mayer-Schönberger, Professor at the Oxford Internet Institute, and Kenneth Cukier, Data Editor at *The Economist* contend in their popular book *Big Data: A Revolution That Will Transform How We Live, Work, and Think*, this massive growth of the world's data not only outstrips our computers, but also our imaginations—and Big Data does pose really intriguing computational problems. These problems and challenges, though, are usually ignored in the general hype around Big Data, which basically reduces it to network analytics. Big Data is so big, not only because we produce so much data daily, but because every click—every change of state—is stored and interconnected across time and space. Big Data, as currently conceived, depends on the archiving and recycling of data—the linking of seemingly unrelated databases—in order to make surprising "discoveries." FICO's Medication Adherence Score, for instance, determines how likely patients are to take medications regularly, based on information such as whether or not one pays for car insurance.

This exponential growth in data allegedly means that sampling is no longer necessary: we have all the data. Most boldly and controversially, *Wired* editor Chris Anderson has asserted, "[T]he data deluge makes the scientific method obsolete."[30] Big Data ends the need for hypotheses and for theory: It is not only humanists who are discussing "the end of theory."[31] Less controversially, Mayer-Schönberger and Cukier argue that Big Data fundamentally challenges the theories based on causality, because it shows that the what matters more than why.[32] Rather than causality, what matters is correlation—how things are related, not why we think they are.

Not surprisingly David Hume is the favored philosopher of Big Data analytics; references to him appear in popular venues such as *Wired Magazine* and in PowerPoint presentations made by those advising

the US Intelligence Community.[33] Although these references rarely engage Hume's work seriously, they highlight the importance of habits to understanding how causality, correlation, and anticipation work in the era of Big Data—and reference to Hume also challenges the notion that causality has simply been replaced by correlation. Gilles Deleuze, reading Hume's *Experience and Subjectivity* (a text that would have a profound effect on Deleuze's later work), explains how Hume's theory of causality links experience to habit as follows: causality, Deleuze explains, does not proceed "on the basis of certainty" (it is not based on "intuition or demonstration"), but rather on the basis of "probabilities."[34] This does not mean that causality is derived from probability, but rather that causality forms gradually and is the result of habit, which presupposes experience, even as it does not coincide with it. According to Hume, "[E]xperience is a principle, which instructs me in the several conjunctions of objects for the past. Habit is *another principle*, which determines me to expect the same for the future."[35] Experience presents cases of constant conjunction to the inspecting mind, but "repetition by itself does not constitute progression" (*D*, 67). Habit is the root of reason. Habit allows the mind to transcend experience: to reason about experience "as it transforms belief into a possible act of the understanding" (*D*, 68). Causality is thus both "the union of similar objects and also a mental inference from one object to another" (*D*, 68).

Habit and experience are not—and do not—always have to be unified. Habit, for Hume, can falsify experience: it "can feign or invoke a false experience, and bring about belief through 'a repetition' which 'is not deriv'd from experience.'"[36] These beliefs, however inevitable, are, Hume stresses and Deleuze underscores, illegitimate: they "form the set of general, extensive, and excessive rules that . . . [are called] *nonphilosophical probability*" (*D*, 69). To correct these beliefs, the understanding intervenes through a corrective principle that restrains belief to the limits of past experience—to the "rules of *philosophical probability* or the calculus of probabilities" so, although "the characteristic of belief, inference, and reasoning is to transcend experience and to transfer the past to the future; . . . it is still necessary that the object of belief be determined in accordance with a past experience" (*D*, 69, 71). According to Hume: "[W]hen we transfer the past to the future, the known to the unknown, every past experiment has the same weight, and . . . 'tis only a superior number of them which can throw the balance on any side."[37]

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Big Data, with its ability to "find" multiple seemingly unrelated correlations, challenges this link between experience and habit. Experience does not correct or ground habit, because correlations of the second order are what matter. Because the body is singular plural, what matters are relations not between things that happen repeatedly or successively to one individual, but rather correlations between actions by different "neighbors" over time and space. This, however, does not mean that experience and habit are irrelevant, but that the link between habit and correction can happen at different time and space scales. The body is always collective, and a singular action never singular, because it is linked to a pattern elsewhere.

Although this cannot be elaborated fully here, many of the supposed correlations Big Data discovers are not only obvious, they are also linked to questions of race/gender/sexuality/class. For instance, Target's pregnancy prediction score determines the likelihood of a female user being pregnant, based on her purchases of vitamin supplements and unscented lotions.[38] The fact that it takes Big Data to realize that human female procreators suffer from morning sickness is dumbfounding and raises questions about corporate hiring. How much less expensively could Target have figured this out, if it had more women in leadership positions? Further, as the medical insurance examples reveal, Big Data can lead to rational yet unfair conclusions: the tie between paying for car insurance and adherence to a regular medication regimen can further exacerbate inequalities by making the poor pay more for their health insurance. Big Data, in other words, by finding seemingly unrelated correlations can exacerbate existing inequalities and lead to racist and discriminatory practices, justified through the use of seemingly innocuous proxies. Through these proxies, allegedly coarse and outdated categories of race, class, sexuality, and gender are accounted for in unaccountable ways.

So what should we do? Does this correlation of habit across bodies and spaces mean that we should run away, go off the grid, try to create bubbles of privacy that deny our vulnerability?

Clearly, we do need protections and rights, but we also need to acknowledge that security, both personal and national, has been a driving factor behind the current development of the web—its transformation from cyberspace to the social web. Anonymity quickly moved from grounding user freedom to being blamed for everything wrong with the web, for destroying the possibility of a civilized public sphere. Corporations such as Google and Facebook, which also needed reliable, authenticated information for their data mining operations, supported

and continue to support tethering on- and offline identities as the best and easiest way to foster responsibility and combat online aggression.[39] Randi Zuckerburg, marketing director of Facebook, argued in 2011 that, for the sake of safety, "[a]nonymity on the Internet has to go away." Eric Schmidt, CEO of Google, made a similar argument in 2010 stating, "in a world of asynchronous threats, it is too dangerous for there not to be some way to identify you."[40] These arguments were not new or specific to Web 2.0: Ever since the Internet emerged as a mass medium in the mid-1990s, corporations have argued that securing identity is crucial to securing trust.

Many scholars have challenged this linking of trust and security, most insightfully Helen Nissenbaum. Nissenbaum, writing in 2001, noted that, although security is central to activities such as e-commerce and banking, it can "no more achieve trust and trustworthiness, online—in their full-blown senses—than prison bars, surveillance cameras, airport X-ray conveyor belts, body frisks, and padlocks, could achieve offline. This is so because the very ends envisioned by the proponents of security and e-commerce are contrary to core meanings and mechanisms of trust."[41] Trust, she insists, is a far richer concept that entails a willingness to be vulnerable. As she also points out, the reduction of trust to security assumes that danger stems from outsiders, rather than "sanctioned, established, powerful individuals and organizations."[42] The development of the Internet has made Nissenbaum's words prophetic. With this so-called transparency, we have not only seen an explosion of e-commerce, but also a blossoming of cyberbullying and cyberporn. The naive presumption that transparency would cure the evils of the early Internet—pornography, trolling, flame wars, etcetera—has proven to be false. Further, the use of "unique identifiers" has enabled Big Data analytics. The NSA's data is so valuable precisely because private corporations have been pushing "unique identifiers" as a way to track users across time and space: without them, it would be difficult if not impossible to create "neighborhoods." The outcries of corporations against the NSA ring false. Again, surveillance is coproduced transnationally by corporations and states.

Thus, rather than fighting for a privacy that is no privacy, what if we rather embraced our role as collective characters in public? What if, rather than accepting the reduction of trust to corporate security, we embraced Nissenbaum's argument that trust entails the ability to take risks? To make this point, let me conclude with the example of DREAM Activists.

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On 5 April 2013 a series of undocumented young adults posted videos to Youtube in support of the US DREAM Act, a legislative act that would grant persons of "good moral character" who entered the US before the age of 16 resident status. In these videos, individuals "came out" as undocumented and unafraid; they relayed stories of their personal struggles and their demands for justice. In one of the most viewed videos (10,089 views as of 18 May 2015), Maria Marroquin states:

> My name is Maria and I am undocumented. If you are watching this video it is because I've been arrested.
> [*Maria Marroquin / Undocumented and Unafraid / Pennsylvania / 23 yrs old*]
> I was born in Lima, Peru and I came to this country when I was 13 years old, and since then I was enrolled as a ninth grader, and I studied hard, and I got good grades, but I realized I was different in my junior year in high school. I realized that because of my status or my lack of status I was not going to be able to continue with my education and go on to college. Despite all the obstacles, I decided to work hard and I graduated from high school in 2004 with top grades, and then enrolled at a community college as an international student because currently in Pennsylvania undocumented students like me are forced to pay international students tuition with no financial aid. It took me five years to complete a two-year degree, and I graduated last year in 2010 with an Associate's degree in social sciences and a 3.98 GPA. Despite all these achievements, I still find myself stuck because I cannot continue with my education to become an immigration lawyer. Right now I am doing this because I don't want my brother and my sister to go through the same struggles I went through. I do not want them to go through five years of school to complete a two-year degree.
> [*Break . . . Sorry. Crying . . . I can cut all this out . . . look up. Sorry. Don't apologize crying is the highest form of strength*]
> I am doing this right now because in Georgia there are laws and bans on students and I am tired of seeing students being criminalized for wanting to obtain an education. I am tired of seeing students lose hope because they cannot realize their dreams of living freely in this country.[43]

As Cristina Beltrán reveals in her insightful analysis of these DREAM activists, these videos, and the "Coming Out of the Shadows" campaign more generally, consciously deploy tactics of visibility developed by LGBTQ activists.[44] More confrontational and creative than previous forms of undocumented immigrant activism, they create "new spaces in which the undocumented are not objectified members of a criminalized

population who are simply spoken *about* but instead are *speaking* subjects and agents of change" (*B*, 81). Although Marroquin's narrative emphasizes her academic commitment, others use "humor, anger and irony" to fight against their criminalization (*B*, 98). In general, they refuse to apologize for their actions or their parent's actions and fight against their criminalization. Beltrán argues that radical DREAMers "queer the movement, expressing more complex and sophisticated conceptions of loyalty, legality, migration, sexuality, and patriotism than those typically offered by politicians, pundits, and other political elites." (*B*, 81). Specifically, they refuse to deploy a xenophilic strategy—that is, one that celebrates immigrants as the ideal outsider citizens—not only because it has not been successful in the past, but also because it marks them as "forever foreign" (*B*, 86). Although Beltrán is careful not to simply celebrate this queering, since doing so can fall into the trap of homonationalism and thus support narratives of American exceptionalism (i.e., look, we Americans are so much more enlightened than supposedly savage countries which do not respect the rights of homosexuals), she does see this queering—in particular the work of unapologetic "undocuqueer" activists—as transforming, rather than simply accommodating to, existing social structures.

These activists engage in risky activities—they expose themselves and thus court deportation—because they realize that privacy offers no shelter against surveillance and prosecution, just as claiming the position of "ideal immigrant" does not lead to inclusion: for the undocumented, the "private realm serves as the site of a social order characterized by secrecy, exploitation, and fear" (*B*, 94). This rejection of privacy—of the privacy protection of normative national culture—is, as Lauren Berlant has argued, quintessentially queer.[45] Further, by refusing to remain in the shadows and making demands to authorities they do not entirely trust, these youth embrace, Beltrán argues, what Bonnie Honig has called "gothic" notions of power.[46]

These protests are remarkable not only for their fearlessness, but also for their repetition. The lines "I am undocumented," and "I am unafraid," are reiterated over and over again, and each narrative follows a template. Each begins with the phrase, "My name is X," and is usually followed by the phrase, "I am undocumented." Like Marroquin's, Viridiana Martinez's cyber testimonial begins with: "My name is Viridiana Martinez. I am undocumented. If you're watching this video, I've been arrested."[47] Each then narrates how s/he entered the US as a child, his/her struggle to stay in school, the desire for education, etcetera. (The DREAM Act promised students

with postsecondary education a path towards permanent residency.)
Further, these DREAMers wear the same T-shirts, featuring the
phrases, "I AM UN-DOC-U-MENT-ED" or DREAM or QUIP
(Queer, Undocumented, Immigrant Project). They embrace and indeed
accentuate Youtube's unrelenting template. Rather than strike poses to
mark their singularities, they use camera angles, clothing, etcetera, to
stress similarities—to create their own documentation, or, to draw from
the work of Sarah Banet-Weiser, their own "brand" of authenticity.[48]
They reveal their personal truths—their secrets however open (the
fact that they cannot register as in-state students immediately marks
them as undocumented)—to the public. In this sense they exemplify
and perhaps occupy the branding of authenticity that drives neoliberal
modes of empowerment.[49]

These protests raise many questions, especially regarding the "epis-
temology of outing" that dominates web rhetoric.[50] What does it mean
to confess to what already has been confessed in a medium in which
we are always confessing? What does it mean to insist on speaking
when what one says is already known? That is, what does it mean to
"come out" as a way to preempt the inevitable? How can we understand
this impulse to expose our secrets—to authenticate ourselves—when
we are already public? Lastly—and most importantly—how can we
understand the DREAMers embrace of templates as a means of shelter
and habitation?

What the DREAMers and their repetition reveal is the power of
reading as writing—the hope of the singular plural. This exposure—this
repetition—reveals that one is never alone. At their best, they play
with the singular plural that is the YOU. They inhabit it in order to
produce a "we" that does not flatten or align identity, but rather that
exposes that singularity is fundamentally plural. Against communities
based on hate/love, they seek community through exposure—for what
is exposed, as Jean Luc Nancy argues, touches another. Importantly,
this is not a question of virality: of one message infecting others,
of communication as contagion. There is contiguity between these
videos, but not continuity.[51] Their meaning is this "we," an originary
multiplicity; the meaning of being as communication, as "being-with-
one-another."[52] It is a meaning that is not represented as society, but
rather through writing.

Nancy has most rigorously theorized writing as communication, as
repetition. Reading the work of Georges Bataille and addressing the
repetition of writing at the end of writing, Nancy argues that writing
"*exscribes*"—that is copies, disseminates—"meaning just as much as it

inscribes signification."[53] Communication, he insists, is not about the communication of meaning or reasonable exchange: "[I]t's not a question of that necessary, ridiculous machination of meaning which puts itself forward as it withdraws, or which puts on a mask as it signifies itself."[54] Rather, writing is a "knowing nothing," that "uses the work of meaning to expose, to lay bare the unusable, unexploitable, unintelligible and unfoundable *being* of being-in-the-world. *That there is* being, or some being or even beings, and in particular that there is *us*, our community (of writing-reading): that is what instigates all possible meanings, that is what is the very place of meaning, but which has no meaning."[55] We repeat—we write, we read, we expose ourselves—to communicate this sense of community, to insist that this "we" is possible.

Networks operate through repetition. We are constantly caressed by signals that exscribe, that have everything to do with communicating, but little to do with meaning. Networks work—they allow us to communicate—by exposing users, by making users vulnerable, so to that there can be a "we," however inoperable, to begin with.

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NOTES

[1] See Wendy Hui Kyong Chun, *Updating to Remain the Same: Habitual New Media*, (Cambridge: MIT Press, forthcoming 2016).

[2] John Perry Barlow, "A Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace," *EFF.org*, 1996, accessed 27 August 2014, *https://projects.eff.org/~barlow/Declaration-Final.html*.

[3] For more on this see Wendy Hui Kyong Chun, *Control and Freedom: Power and Paranoia in the Age of Fiber Optics* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2006).

[4] *OED Online*, s.v. "media, n.1," accessed 16 July 2015, http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/115634.

[5] *OED Online, s.v.* "mass media, n.," accessed 16 July 2015, http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/114723.

[6] *OED Online*, s.v. "medium, n. and adj.," accessed 16 July 2015, http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/115772.

[7] *OED Online*, s.v. "medium, n. and adj."

[8] *OED Online*, s.v. "medium, n. and adj."

[9] *OED Online*, s.v. "mass, n.2," accessed 16 July 2015, http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/114666.

[10] *OED Online*, s.v. "mass, n.2."

[11] Sigfried Kracauer, "The Mass Ornament," *New German Critique* 5 (1975): 69.

[12] Roland Barthes, *S/Z*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1974), 5–6.

[13] Stuart Hall, "Encoding, Decoding," *The Cultural Studies Reader*, 2nd ed., ed. Simon During (New York: Routledge, 1993), 517.

[14] See George P. Landau, *Hypertext Theory*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1994), and Sherry Turkle, *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet*, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1995).

[15] See Wendy Brown, *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution*, (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2015).

[16] See "E-Reader Privacy Chart, 2012 Edition," *Electronic Frontier Foundation*, accessed 16 July 2015, *https://www.eff.org/pages/reader-privacy-chart-2012*.

[17] D. A. Miller, *The Novel and the Police* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1988), 208.

[18] Thomas Keenan, "Windows: Of Vulnerability," in *The Phantom Public Sphere*, ed. Bruce Robbins (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1997), 132.

[19] Keenan, 132.

[20] See Jean Baudrillard, "The Masses: The Implosion of the Social in the Media," trans. Marie Maclean, *New Literary History* 16.3 (1985): 577–89.

[21] Jean Baudrillard, *In the Shadow of the Silent Majorities . . . Or the End of the Social and Other Essays* (New York: Semiotext(e), 1983), 1.

[22] Baudrillard, *In the Shadow,* 2.

[23] Baudrillard, *In the Shadow,* 22

[24] Taina Bucher, "Want to be on the top? Algorithmic power and the threat of invisibility on Facebook," *New Media & Society* 14.7 (2012): 1164–80.

[25] For more on this, see Mung Chiang, *Networked Life: 20 Questions and Answers* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2012).

[26] See "The Netflix Prize Rules," http://www.netflixprize.com/rules.

[27] As quoted by Antoinette Rouvroy in "Technology, Virtuality and Utopia: Governmentality in an Age of Autonomic Computing," in *Autonomic Computing and Transformations of Human Agency*, ed. Mireille Hildebrandt and Antoinette Rouvroy (Milton Park: Routledge, 2011), 128.

[28] Rouvrov, 127.

[29] "Bringing big data to the enterprise," *IBM.com*, accessed 16 July 2015, http://www-01.ibm.com/software/data/bigdata/what-is-big-data.html.

[30] Chris Anderson, "THE END OF THEORY: Will the Data Deluge Make the Scientific Method Obsolete?" *Edge*, 30 June 2009, accessed 15 May 2014, http://edge.org/3rd_culture/anderson08/anderson08_index.html.

[31] Anderson "THE END OF THEORY."

[32] See Victor Mayer-Schönberger and Kenneth Cukier, *Big Data: A Revolution That Will Transform How We Live, Work, and Think* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2013).

[33] See Jonah Lehrer, "Trails and Errors: Why Science is Failing Us," *Wired*, 16 December 2011, accessed 15 May 2014, http://www.wired.com/2011/12/ff_causation; and Robert Mark and others, "Big Data, Systemic Risk and the US Intelligence Community" (Enterprise Risk Management Symposium, Chicago, IL, 22–24 April 2013), accessed 15 May 2014, https://www.yumpu.com/en/document/view/15445772/2013-chicago-erm-2f-mark.

[34] David Hume, quoted in Gilles Deleuze, *Empiricism and Subjectivity: An Essay on Hume's Theory of Human Nature* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1991), 65.

[35] Deleuze, *Empiricism and Subjectivity*, 67. Hereafter abbreviated as *D* and cited parenthetically by page number.

[36] Hume quoted in Deleuze, 69.

[37] Hume as quoted in Deleuze, 71.

[38] Mayer-Schönberger and Cukier, *Big Data*, 56–58.

[39] See Bianca Bosker, "Facebook's Randi Zuckerberg: Anonymity Online 'Has To Go Away.'" *Huffington Post*, 27 July 2011, accessed 30 August 2014, *http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2011/07/27/randi-zuckerberg-anonymity-online_n_910892.html;* and Terrell

Ward Bynum, "Anonymity on the Internet and Ethical Accountability," *The Research Center on Computing & Society*, 1997, accessed 30 August 2014, *http://www.southernct.edu/organizations/rccs/oldsite/resources/research/global_info/bynum_anonymity.html*. Importantly, this was not the only solution offered to foster critical public dialog: competing against this simple tying of transparency with responsibility were formalized "reputation systems," such as the one developed by slashdot.org, which were based on pseudonymic usage. These systems evolved through long-term usage and communal evaluation: features that would prove essential to any functioning online space, whether pseudonymic or transparent.

[40] See Bianca Bosker, "Eric Schmidt On Privacy: Google CEO Says Anonymity Online Is 'Dangerous,'" Video, *Huffington Post*, 8 October 2010, accessed 30 August 2014, *http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2010/08/10/eric-schmidt-privacy-stan_n_677224.html*.

[41] Helen Nissenbaum, "Securing Trust Online: Wisdom or Oxymoron?," *Boston University Law Review* 81.3 (2001): 655.

[42] Nissenbaum, 662.

[43] See "Maria Marroquin, DreamActivist Pennsylvania," *Youtube.com*, 5 April 2011, *https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aFXTNk3YOnY*. This video is arguably the most popular because of an article by the Center for Immigrant Studies, which targeted her as an "illegal alien" working for Obamacare, see: James R. Edwards Jr., "Illegal Alien Heads Obamacare Navigator Program in NYC," *Center for Immigration Studies*, 15 October 2013, *http://cis.org/edwards/illegal-alien-heads-obamacare-navigator-program-nyc*. Her video and continued fight for immigrant rights led to her visibility.

[44] See Cristina Beltrán, "'Undocumented, Unafraid, and Unapologetic': DREAM Activists, Immigrant Politics, and the Queering of Democracy," *From Voice to Influence: Understanding Citizenship in a Digital Age* (Chicago: Chicago Univ. Press, 2015), 80–104. Hereafter abbreviated as *B* and cited parenthetically by page number.

[45] See Lauren Berlant, *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City: Essays on Sex and Citizenship*, (Durham: Duke Univ. Press, 1997), 62.

[46] Quoted in Beltrán, 103.

[47] See "Viridiana Martinez, North Carolina Dream Team," *Youtube.com*, 5 April 2011, accessed 28 May 2015, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4Fbo4NT_p5M.

[48] See Sarah Banet-Weiser, *Authentic™: The Politics and Ambivalence in a Brand Culture* (New York: New York Univ. Press, 2012).

[49] There is an odd parallel between Beltrán's description of undocumented activists and Banet-Weiser's description of neoliberal subjects engaged in practices of self-disclosure—of putting themselves out there transparently—that drive neoliberal conflations of branding with freedom. See Banet-Weiser, *Authentic*, 60.

[50] Edward Snowden in *Citizenfour*, for instance, frames his decision to reveal his name to the public—for Poitras and company to "paint the target on his back" as a form of coming out. In response to Glenn Greenwald's question: "[Y]ou're coming out because you want to fucking come out" rather than simply because he thinks the government already knows that he is the leak, Snowden replies: "I don't want to hide on this and skulk around, I don't think I should have to. . . . I think it is powerful to come out and be like, 'look I'm not afraid and I don't think other people should be either'. . . . I think that's brilliant. I mean your principles on this I love, I can't support them enough because it is, it's inverting the model that the government has laid out where people were trying to, you know, say the truth, skulk around, and then hide in the dark, and then quote anonymously. I say yes, fuck that" (*Citizenfour*, directed by Laura Poitras [Los Angeles: Praxis Films, 2014]). Russia's and China's embrace of Snowden is thus an

odd reversal of the usual mode of homonationalism. Rather than the US congratulating itself for sheltering those who have come out and are not safe elsewhere, Russia prides itself as offering refuge to Snowden after his dangerous "coming out."

[51] See Jean-Luc Nancy, *Being Singular Plural*, (Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 2000), 5.

[52] Nancy, *Being Singular Plural*, 3.

[53] Nancy, "Exscription," trans. Katherine Lydon, *Yale French Studies* 78 (1990): 63.

[54] Nancy, "Exscription," 63.

[55] Nancy, "Exscription," 64.