THE CRISIS OF PRESENCE IN CONTEMPORARY CULTURE

ETHICS, PRIVACY AND SPEECH IN MEDIATED SOCIAL LIFE

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INTRODUCTION

In his book *The Virtual*, Rob Shields opens with an account of the execution of Archbishop of Canterbury Thomas Cramner for heresy in 1556. The basis for this occasion, and these charges, largely revolved around his repeated denial of 'transubstantiation' during the performance of the Sacraments of the Eucharist. That is, within the Catholic faith, it was (and still is) believed that during the performance of the Sacraments, the bread and wine given to consume during communion *actually become* the body and blood of Christ. These, of course, continue to appear in the form of bread and wine, but their substance has been transformed. Christ himself becomes tangible as substance, bodily present, through the bread and wine. In that sense, Christ is given a 'real presence' in communion, and the 'real' last supper is made present again for all to share (Gumbrecht 2004).

Many Protestant reformers, including Cranmer, disagreed. He proposed the doctrine of 'virtualism': that what is received in the form of bread and wine is not the substance of the body and blood of Christ, but symbolic of the virtue and power of Christ. The *meaning* and *effect* of the bread and wine are transformed, but not their *substance*. Thus, Christ's presence changed from being a 'real presence' to a virtual or symbolic one. These substances, and the entire ritual itself, became *evocational* of both Christ's body and the event of the last supper. The 'is' in the phrase 'this is my body' ceased to be literal, as in 'this *has become* my body', and changed to mean 'this *stands for* my body':

> The doctrine of virtualism raised questions concerning the way we understand presence – must it be concrete and embodied, or was 'essentially present' good enough? Was there anything if it was virtual? (Shields 2003: 6)

For many Protestants, the virtual presence of Christ was good enough, but for Catholics, Holy Communion gained its power through this literal bodily presence of Christ and the direct participation of a real 'Last Supper' in which all believers took part.

Shields evokes these events to demonstrate how the problem of the virtual is nothing new and how such debates resonate with contemporary culture when we question the legitimacy of virtual presences in comparison to actual ones. Debates about the potential for 'virtual communities', online romances and virtual politics, for example, deal directly with such questions as whether being virtually present is 'good enough'.

However, in many respects, this incident also reflects a pivotal and significant moment for Western philosophical thought. Today, many of us (even some Catholics, dare I say) as modern people find the notion of transubstantiation a little strange, an appeal to a kind of blind faith in miracles and magic that seems a little out of place. But the reason this transformation made sense to a medieval culture as opposed to a modern one has to do with a shift not only from blind faith to more 'rational', post-enlightenment thought but also in what things are thought to be composed of, how they are represented and how, ultimately, they exist.

Philosophically speaking, this debate over presence is really over ontology, about the nature of being or existence itself, and over what kinds of things can be said to exist and how. Gumbrecht (2004) saw the real presence debate as emblematic of a shift away from what he calls a *presence culture*, one which emphasised the body as integral to the self and the existence of humans as integrated and inscribed within the material world and more towards a post-enlightenment (and modern) *meaning culture*, which locates the subject within the concept of 'mind' (as opposed to the body). In a meaning culture, humans see themselves as 'eccentric' to the world. That is, their minds or essences stand apart from the world and give it meaning. In the transition to a meaning culture, things in themselves become less important than the meaning (to humans) of those things. Thus it is very easy and straightforward to see how in post-enlightenment Protestant Christianity the meaning of bread can change without any kind of empirical change in its appearance or substance. The meaning of the thing is (conceptually, at least) detached from the object itself.

Contemporary culture is fraught with its own debate over virtualism and the contradictions it presents. We live in a world where, as a result of digital communication technologies, we are increasingly connected to each other. These technologies distribute us, extending us in profound ways. This process and this observation is nothing new, having been elaborated in Marshall McLuhan's classic work *Understanding Media: Extensions of Man* in 1964, where he argues that all media and technologies are extensions of some physical, social, psychological or intellectual function of humans. However, the scale and scope of contemporary digital media's affordance to extend ourselves, particularly socially,

is something without precedent. This has resulted in a situation in which our social horizons, interactions, personal characteristics and indeed presences are much less spatially limited than in the past. We have moved beyond the sphere of physical proximity and into a world of electronic connectivity where we are simultaneously 'present' and 'not present'. This is a move which Manuel Castells, in another classic *The Network Society* (1996), referred to as a shift from the 'space of places' to 'the space of flows' and the culture of 'real virtuality'.

This virtualisation of social life fits quite well with what can be seen as the modern, Western conception of what it is to be a person. We tend to place the locus of 'identity' or 'self' within the disembodied, intellectual, abstract concept of 'mind', 'spirit' or 'psyche'. This is our intellectual and religious heritage which began among the Classical philosophers of ancient Greece (especially Plato), continued in Christianity and was reaffirmed in enlightenment thought of Descartes and others: ultimately becoming the basis of 'Modern' philosophy. Thus, a society in which human interaction is becoming increasingly performed at a distance through virtual means – one where social life is increasingly conducted in the abstract, not through bodies but through interfaces – seems in many respects to be a logical extension of a culture that prioritises 'mind' as the primary characteristic of being human. As J. P. Barlow (1996) put it in his *Declaration of Independence of Cyberspace*,

> I come from Cyberspace, the new home of Mind.

This early 1990s' style Internet utopianism among both computing scientists and social science and humanities academics reflected this general post-enlightenment, Cartesian view (Yar 2014). Escaping our bodies equated to 'starting again' with a society that has no governments, power structures or oppression. The public face of this new technological utopianism was *Wired* magazine, which published one technophilic article after another through the 1990s praising how the Internet was going to make a new society.

This optimism has, in recent years, given way to a more pessimistic tone. In the last few years, a number of commentaries have emerged lamenting various forms of 'wrong turns' taken by digital culture in terms of social life.[1] These range from complaints about how the technology itself is being configured in ways that limit, not expand, human freedom and expression (Carr 2011; Galloway and Thacker 2007; Keen 2012; Lanier 2010; Morozov 2011; Pariser

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[1] One recent example is Morozov's (2011b) article in *Prospect* magazine: 'Two decades of the internet: a utopia no longer'.

2011; Stiegler 2010) to studies that demonstrate how ubiquitous presence and constant communication is leading, ironically, to a decline in the quality of social engagement, and even increased social isolation, as a result of communications overload (Baron 2008; Harper 2010; Lovink 2008; Turkle 2011). For example, Turkle (2011) finds the demands of an increasingly networked, 'always on' world create a milieu of shared attention, where people focus less on here and now face-to-face interactions (i.e. the material presence of others) and are continually elsewhere, in a kind of disembodied networked presence with others. For Turkle, face-to-face interactions are now conducted in a more distracted or absent manner because of the continuous multitasking involved with immersion in ubiquitous digital communication technology.

The recent picture painted by media, advocacy groups and legislators of a web plagued by trolls, crime, cyberbullies and revenge porn is no better. The popular press is rife with stories relating to new sets of problems which have emerged and subsequently become a seemingly endemic part of digital culture. Almost every day we are confronted by news of a teenager who gets cyberbullied into taking their own life, or of celebrities, politicians, athletes and activists (and even the dead) who are mercilessly trolled to the point where they close their Twitter account. Massive data leaks resulting from the hacking of sites such as Adobe and Ashley Madison have revealed the passwords, transactions, encrypted credit card information and the very personal conversations, photos and conducts of over 150 and 34 million people, respectively. In the meantime, the average person has also learned, through Edward Snowden and WikiLeaks, that their Google, Skype, Facebook and mobile phone accounts may have already been spied on by various government agencies that have been given unprecedented, large-scale access to our personal communications and activities (Mackaskill and Dance 2013). Such incidents have finally demonstrated to the world what writers such as David Lyon have been arguing for decades – that worries about privacy and data collection online are a very legitimate concern.[2]

Such incidents inevitably result in calls for governments, websites and Internet service providers to 'do something', but there are varying opinions about what should, or even could, be done. The difficulty is that the online sphere is still often considered (and celebrated) as a 'liminal' space with its

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2   For their part, many of the biggest collectors or personal data, such as Google, Facebook, and Amazon, have begun to respond to popular concerns over privacy and how data are used and shared by allowing for more extensive privacy setting and management of one's internet histories and profiles.

own set of norms and where the conventions of civil society are less apparent. However, the spaces of networked digital technologies are no longer liminal. They are now part and parcel of the experience of everyday life and the medium through which an increasing amount of social life is conducted; an important disjuncture now exists between the vision of the Internet as a utopian (disembodied) space free of the constraints of society and the reality of how digital technologies are ubiquitously used in everyday, materially embedded social life. The notion of 'anonymity', for example, was previously seen as almost central to early utopian visions of the Internet as an arena of free speech and is now often portrayed as the central problem in a contemporary 'real world' of trolling, bullying, crime and exploitation.

The typical approach to incidents and problems such as these has been to create more specific laws to deal with the ever-changing nature of behaviour online. For example, in the UK, while the Communications Act (2003) is an umbrella act which governs all communications media, including the Internet, new practices such as trolling, cyberbullying and revenge porn have precipitated the creation of further laws and/or tougher sentences to deal with these specific acts (Harley 2014; UK Ministry of Justice 2014). Taking revenge porn as an example, this UK strategy is in line with other European nations, as well as Israel, Australia, Canada, Japan and several American states that have enacted or are debating new revenge porn laws since 2014.

However, there are a number of complications in enacting such laws, since what constitutes obscenity, threats or hate speech online is complicated not only by the problem of competing national jurisdictions (e.g. the United States does not outlaw 'hate speech' while most European countries do) but also by the complex contextual and conversational nature of online writing which often confuses public and private speech. In this regard, both misapplication of the law and more informal collective punishments have serious consequences for the notion of free speech and the development of a healthy online public sphere. As a result, any laws passed are often heavily watered down and seen as ineffective. For example, Goldman (2013) demonstrates how ineffective new revenge porn laws can be, especially considering how much of their territory is already covered by existing laws, and Warr (2015) suggests that the most useful laws to deal with revenge porn already exist in the form of copyright law.

It does beg the question as to where this will all end and whether these are the most productive approaches to deal with an endemic problem which is in a state of constant technical and social change. One can point to a seemingly never-ending cycle of technological innovation, onset of a new antisocial or invasive or abusive practice, increasing cases of victimisation, and the following

public outcry and attempts at legislation. This inevitably moves responsibility for interpersonal behaviour from embodied humans to the abstract principles of state and the law (Bauman 1993) or other abstract systems (Giddens 1991).

But, if anything, these incidents perhaps illustrate how bodies are important. They hint at the idea that maybe our construction as social, ethical beings that show care, concern and responsibility for others is not merely based on abstract principles, but also on more material dimensions such as being located in a body at a certain time and place, being in physical proximity of other people and being aware of other people. We may have an intellectual and philosophical bias towards 'minds', but it can also be argued that we have an affective bias towards bodies. This also needs to be considered when we think about the implications of the Internet for human behaviour.

With that in mind, this book will investigate three issues in particular which have captured the public imagination as 'problems' emerging directly from the contemporary use of communications technology: online antisocial behaviour, the problem of privacy and the problem of free speech online. Through a critical and philosophical examination of each of these cases in turn, I will argue that these problems have at their roots the issue of *presence* and are evoking what I call a 'crisis of presence'. I argue that the use of ubiquitous communication technologies has created a disjuncture between how we think we exist in the world (how we understand our presence in time, place and in proximity to one another, and the typical social actions and ethical stances which stem from such assumptions) and how we actually do exist in the world through our use of such devices. The main problem here, I suggest, is a lack of awareness of our own and others' presence in the world through these technologies and thus the inability to make proper judgements about the consequences of our actions in online contexts.

THE BOOK

While in some senses presence can be seen as a conceptual or philosophical problem, the goal of this book is to demonstrate how this 'crisis of presence' involves a number of serious practical and ethical issues in contemporary digital culture which have not only entered into the popular imagination but have also been the focus of a significant amount of popular media and governmental concern. This will be illustrated through several case studies of well-known 'problems' within contemporary digital culture.

It is important to note that my goal with this book is to demonstrate that a concern with 'presence' in its various conceptualisations is a fruitful line of

enquiry when it comes to many of the issues facing contemporary digital culture. This is not to suggest that 'presence' is a clear or coherent concept. Quite the opposite. Presence, and the theoretical and philosophical literature around it, is complex and its analysis emerges from a variety of ontological, epistemological and analytical positions. This is true even among the smaller number of writers upon which this book is greatly influenced (Heidegger, Levinas, Derrida, Stiegler). Thus, the point of this book is not to dogmatically apply one particular position on 'presence' to the entire Internet, or even to all of the case studies presented here. The goal is to demonstrate, using an eclectic array of theories and philosophical positions, how presence in general can be considered central to these phenomena and thereby helpful in their analysis.

Chapter 1, 'Metaphysical and technological presence', will introduce the overall theoretical frame of the work by discussing the critique of 'the metaphysics of presence' as exemplified by Heidegger and Derrida among others. Here, the traditional placing within Western culture of the locus of human being in a particular concept of 'self', 'mind', 'spirit' or 'psyche' will be traced from its classical philosophical roots through to modern philosophy. Such a view was famously discussed by Heidegger when he argued that Western culture had misunderstood being by privileging 'metaphysical' presence/being and critiqued the notion of what it is to be human in the Western intellectual tradition as a self-enclosed, abstract, thinking subject, which is ontologically separate from the objects in the world.

This chapter will consider and assess the relevance of these arguments, especially where they concern digital culture, then examine the critique of the metaphysics of presence using the work of writers largely inspired by phenomenological approaches (Heidegger, Levinas, Derrida, Stiegler), and follow it up with a critical discussion of 'mediation' and the 'disembodied' Internet. The chapter suggests that in an age of ubiquitous digital communication such concerns become even more prescient when technology is altering and extending our being and presence in profound ways through ubiquitous communication; the digitalisation and virtualisation of information, human interaction and social life; and the creation of virtual environments which blend into material ones.

Chapter 2, 'Presence, proximity and ethical behaviour online', will examine the problem of ethical behaviour online through a discussion of trolling, cyberbullying and other forms of antisocial and unethical behaviour. This chapter will challenge the assumption that such behaviour is the result of 'anonymity' by looking at the relationship between physical proximity and ethical behaviour.

Using the works of Levinas, Bauman, Silverstone and Turkle (among others), I demonstrate that our sense of self as caring, moral, ethical beings is often based on more material dimensions such as being located in a body in proximity to other bodies and interacting with and caring for others in physical proximity to ourselves. I suggest that the increasing mediation of social life through digital technologies and our increasing presence in online environments challenge our tendencies to ground moral and ethical behaviours in face-to-face or materially co-present contexts. As a result, the mediated presences we can achieve amplify our cultural tendency to objectify the social world and weaken our sense of moral and ethical responsibility to others. In online environments, this leaves others who are physically absent but socially present to us open to being seen through the technological stance of 'enframing' and thus available for exploitation.

Chapter 3, '"Find love in Canada": distributed selves, abstraction and the problem of privacy and autonomy', will primarily tackle the problem of privacy and autonomy within contemporary society. Primarily inspired by the works of Brian Rotman and Bernard Stiegler, this chapter will discuss how the crisis of presence also concerns a misunderstanding of our own contemporary being in terms of our awareness of distributed presence in digital networks and servers. It will approach the problem of privacy as a problem of, on the one hand, the abstractive tendencies in digital culture and, on the other, of how we exist as profiles, avatars, databases, bits of text and otherwise, simultaneously in many different virtual and physical locations.

Here I suggest that the problem lies in how such presences are turned into abstracted forms of 'data'. As data, this virtual matter is conceived of as 'information about' beings as opposed to 'the matter of being' in contemporary environments. This allows aspects of the contemporary self (i.e. data about ourselves) to be treated as commodities, not as meaningful components of the self but as a series of potentially useful or valuable objects (data to be used and sold). This 'matter as data' carries with it no ethical weight, and thus the handling of personal data is, therefore, largely freed from any kind of ethical or moral responsibility that one might have towards a physically co-present human. This encourages the rampant collection of data, invasions of privacy and the spread of personal information.

Chapter 4, '"Going to Africa…": the problem of speech in a world where we write instead of talk', builds upon the arguments in the previous chapter by examining the problem of speech, disclosure and misunderstanding in online communication. Here I consider the implications of our conversations, movements, musings and curiosities having the immediacy and intention of

speech, but the life, longevity and mediated presence of the written word. The blurring of these distinctions between speech and writing has created a new form of social problem in which the distinction between private communication and mass media statements, between present conversant and mediated audiences, is also blurred. This gives us unknown and unanticipated presences in a variety of contexts. Thus, we see on an almost daily basis the scandals of unintended disclosure and 'Twitter fires', in which statements, photographs or information unintendedly become part of the public sphere, often proving to be controversial, illegal and even career-destroying. This has serious consequences for the notion of free speech and the development of a healthy online public sphere. I suggest that this blurring of speech and writing, and public and private communication, is fundamentally a problem of time and the timelessness of speaking/writing digitally in a world of endemic connection and archiving.

Having outlined the nature of the crisis of presence and some of its contemporary manifestations, I intend to conclude with a discussion of how, potentially, the problematic processes outlined here can be addressed. Thus far, the solutions proposed have mainly been targeted at online anonymity and to use the law and prosecutions to further regulate interpersonal communication and surveillance in online contexts. These solutions are less than desirable as they threaten much of what the web has come to symbolise in terms of political and social freedoms and merely scratch the surface of what is a much deeper problem anyway. This is comparable to treating the symptoms of a disease but not the underlying cause of these symptoms.

Overall, I argue that if we wish to avoid the trend towards increasing regulation and surveillance of online life, the challenge for networked humanity is to recognise and resist the tendency towards abstraction and metaphysically inspired instrumentalism inherent in our cultural tendencies and embedded in our use of technology. Such efforts could move some way towards reestablishing a link between physical and social presence and bring ethical encounter back into mediated communications. Thus the concluding chapter will propose several avenues which together may contribute towards a more productive approach to problems such as the ones highlighted in this book.

First, we need to recognise that these problems are the result of a certain 'stance' taken to the world and enabled by technology, so that the solution is not to focus on the content as much as it is to examine the alienating aspects of the media itself. Second, we need to expand the notion of 'self' or 'being' to include the presences we achieve through integration with technology.

This means including the virtual presences of profiles, avatars, databases as part of the 'matter of being' or the self. Such a shift would give 'ethical weight' to an otherwise ethically weightless set of mathematical data conceived of purely as commodities. Third, it is necessary to accept that we need to change the architecture of technologically mediated encounter, especially in terms of social media, away from ever more visually and mathematically reductionist interfaces to ones that are more compatible with the phenomenological experience of being human and encountering other humans.