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Published online: 11 Aug 2010.

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Exorcising the 'plague of fantasies': mass media and archaeology's role in the present; or, why we need an archaeology of 'now'

Rodney Harrison

Abstract

Taking as its starting point Slavoj Žižek's (1997) *The Plague of Fantasies*, this paper considers how the electronic mediascape and its contagious practices have come to dominate all areas of contemporary reportage and history-making. It suggests that Web 2.0's reliance on 'mob thinking' and 'wiki-histories' can lead to a rapid and widespread erasure of alternative accounts and non-dominant narratives. Against this background, the paper explores the urgency of developing an 'archaeology of now' which could provide a stimulus for the exploration of marginal and subaltern viewpoints and alternative contemporary histories. Such an archaeology might involve not only a focus on contemporary material evidence, but also the analysis of virtual material culture and the excavation of virtual media to reveal the power structures and micro-histories of the World Wide Web's dominant narratives. The paper is intentionally provocative, and aims to stimulate a broader engagement with an archaeology of the present.

> Ontologies of the present demand archaeologies of the future, not forecasts of the past.
> (Jameson 2002: 215)

Introduction

In this paper I want to consider a topic which has received very little comment by archaeologists; that is, how Web 2.0 promulgates a belief in the 'wisdom of crowds', and the

ways in which this has come to influence the process of contemporary reportage, and by extension, history-making. I argue that Web 2.0's 'wisdom of crowds' has been significantly overstated, and that an over-reliance on mob thinking can lead to a rapid and widespread erasure and subsequent elimination of alternative accounts and non-dominant narratives. The growth of the World Wide Web and associated electronic media over the past two decades has provided unparalleled access to data and information to many widely dispersed individuals across the globe. Yet such material is both highly unstable and, due to its viral nature, highly partial. This situation provides an important argument for the urgency of developing an 'archaeology of now', with a dual focus on material evidence (which might reveal alternative perspectives and accounts of recent events) and the 'excavation' of virtual accounts to reveal their dynamic power structures and micro-histories. Furthermore, in an increasingly 'virtual' world, archaeology needs to begin to consider virtual material culture by developing an approach which we might think of as a sort of 'cyber-archaeology' (Harrison 2009). While archaeologists have been slow to engage with the internet, others outside the discipline have not only emphasized the materiality of digital artefacts, but have employed a range of archaeological metaphors to describe its dynamics. Many commentators on the need for an archaeology of the contemporary past have emphasized its role in uncovering those things which late modernity has 'hidden', overwritten, made absent or obscured (e.g. Buchli 2002; Buchli and Lucas 2001; González-Ruibal 2008; Harrison and Schofield 2010; Piccini and Holtorf 2009). The paper is not a detailed exploration of the archaeology of now, which I intentionally leave open to further discussion, but, instead, a provocation in which I hope to argue for the urgency of developing an archaeological approach to the present by exploring the nature of the mediascape and its implications for contemporary history-making in the early twenty-first century.

The mediascape and its 'plague of fantasies'

Arjun Appadurai (1996) has discussed the notion of the mediascape as part of his broader description of his theory of 'rupture' that lies at the heart of late modernity. His starting point is the observation that electronic media have fundamentally transformed pre-existing forms of communication and social conduct, leading to changes in the ways in which identity and place are imagined and deployed in contemporary global societies:

> electronic mediation and mass migration mark the world of the present not as technically new forces but as ones that seem to impel (and sometimes compel) the work of the imagination. Together, they create specific irregularities because both viewers and images are in simultaneous circulation.
>
> (Appadurai 1996: 4)

The simultaneous circulation of viewers and images produces a peculiar set of circumstances under which groups participate collectively in widely spaced events and share a feeling of their impacts as part of a 'community of sentiment' (Appadurai 1990, 1996: 8). We might think of the global transmission of images of events such as the

bombing of the World Trade Centre in New York in 2001 (see also Shanks et al. 2004), and the ways in which different groups emerged as a result of differing responses to the disaster. These collective viewings create particular 'solidarities' (Appadurai 1996: 8, 2006) which enable the formation and re-formation of human groups in widely spaced locations. This recalls Giddens' description of the 'collage effect' (1991: 26) and the decoupling of event and location that characterizes late modern forms of mediated communication. For Appadurai, this process demonstrates something which is new about late modernity – the development of the imagination as a new social reality.

Appadurai goes on to define a series of cultural flows through which he explores the fundamental disjunctures between the economy, culture and politics, which he sees as defining the late modern global economy. The most important to this paper is the mediascape.

> *Mediascapes* refer both to the distribution of the electronic capabilities to produce and disseminate information . . . and to the images of the world created by these media . . . . [W]hat is most important about these mediascapes is that they provide . . . large and complex repertoires of images, narratives and ethnoscapes to viewers throughout the world, in which the world of commodities and the world of news and politics are profoundly mixed . . . the lines between the realistic and the fictional landscapes they see are blurred.
>
> (Appadurai 1996: 34)

These mediascapes, and the closely aligned series of images which flow as part of the ideoscape (images and narratives associated with the ideology of statehood and its counter-ideology), allow for the production of fantasies and imagined worlds which were not previously possible. In short, 'mass media creates new scripts for possible lives and possible futures' (Lewellen 2002: 96). These scripts are not derived directly from the mass media, but are filtered through a range of different cultural lenses which means that the images may be consumed and remade in a variety of ways. These scripts ultimately become grafted onto aspects of collective memory through a process which Alison Lansberg (2004) has described as 'prosthetic memory', which occurs as a result of the broad circulation and consumption of individual memories at the collective level. The collective imagination itself develops as a social force and gains agency through the mobilization of these new scripts in visualizing new possibilities, which individuals and groups, in turn, act out within the world.

While Appadurai's work has tended to emphasize the emancipatory value of the electronic media's production of 'communities of sentiment' (as does Lansberg), others have been more wary, suggesting that we should adopt a more conservative view of the effects of electronic communication on the imagination (see, e.g., Virilio 2005, 2008). Žižec describes the 'concatenation of images' (after Appadurai 1996: 36) which constitute the World Wide Web and its associated electronic media as a 'plague of fantasies'.

> This *plague of fantasies* of which Petrarch speaks in *My Secret*, images which blur one's clear reasoning, is brought to its extreme in today's audiovisual media. Among the

antagonisms that characterize our epoch (world-market globalization versus the assertion of ethnic particularisms, etc.), perhaps the key place belongs to the antagonism between the abstraction that increasingly determines our lives (in the guise of digitalization, speculative market relations, etc.) and the deluge of pseudo-concrete images.

(Žižec 1997: xxiii)

Drawing on the work of Debord (1983 [1967]) and Baudrillard (esp. 1995a, 1995b), this 'deluge' of images is referred to as 'pseudo-concrete' in the sense in which such images become indistinguishable from the things they represent. In this, they develop the power to generate fantasies which both conceal and create anxiety, horror and revulsion.

> The psychoanalytic notion of fantasy cannot be reduced to that of a fantasy-scenario which obfuscates the true horror of a situation; the first, rather obvious thing to add is that the relationship between the fantasy and the horror of the Real it conceals is much more ambiguous than it may seem: fantasy conceals this horror, yet at the same time it creates what it purports to conceal, its 'repressed' point of reference.
>
> (Žižec 1997: 6)

Indeed, for many of us it may feel like it is impossible to escape mass electronic media. Wherever we turn – on public transport, on computer screens within our workplaces, on televisions within our homes – we are assaulted by a barrage of images produced by these mass media, and in consuming them we are caught up in complex global networks of opinion and agency. This phantasmagoric jumble of advertising, commentary and reportage can be understood to both produce and be produced by the externalization of various fantasies and fears which represent forms of psychic repression and concealment, while appearing in the guise of an abundance of information. Hence 'fantasies are increasingly immediately externalised in the public symbolic space' (Žižec 1997: 212).

These phantasms and fantasies have become an important, novel and all-pervasive social force in contemporary society. For this reason, the nature and content of the electronic media and their reportage of contemporary events is of vital concern to those with an interest in the recent past. The electronic media do not simply produce an archive relating to the recent past, but *actively create the present* through facilitating its imagined futures.

Viral communications, 'mob thinking' and the concealment of history

Web 2.0 is a term which is used to describe cumulative changes in the nature of the World Wide Web which have led to the growth of technology to facilitate collaboration and information sharing since about 1994. One of the key problems relating to the reportage and history-making of contemporary electronic media is the potential for the communities of sentiment discussed above to produce what I term 'viral wiki-histories', that is, dominant accounts of contemporary and historic events which, through the dynamics of Web 2.0-based authoring, have the tendency to settle on particular versions or accounts

and to over-write alternative ones. While contemporary Web-based media resemble an archive, they are dynamic and constantly being edited and corrected. While there are track-back functions and traces of these edits which exist on servers, these are increasingly inaccessible to all but specialists. Indeed, it is the existence of these traces that makes an archaeological approach to the internet possible. Before we move on, we should consider the etymology of my term 'viral wiki-histories'.

I use the word 'viral' here in the sense of 'viral marketing', a term which describes advertising which exploits the networked nature of the internet to replicate itself using social networking to spread quickly to a large group of consumers. Much of the electronic media relies on viral marketing methods to spread quickly throughout its target audience. For example, a consumer views a piece of advertising, finds it interesting/amusing/stimulating and then passes it on to two friends. If each one of these friends then passes it on to another two consumers, the advertisement's exposure begins to grow exponentially. Rushkoff (1996) describes this form of marketing, drawing a comparison with the way in which epidemiologists describe the growth of a viral epidemic, in which contagion grows according to a logistical curve. This logistical curve is not only important in describing the progressive exposure of a piece of marketing to viewers, but also acts as a model for describing the process by which dominant accounts of past events are formed. As Shanks has noted, 'digital media are materially very fragile, but I am more and more confident that the viral character of networked representation lends it an ironic durability and effectivity' (2009: 556; see also Sampson 2007). It is the viral character of Web 2.0 communication which lends its particular resilience and ultimate stability to dominant accounts of the recent past.

I use the term 'wiki-history' to refer to the collaborative nature of much of the 'authorship' of electronic media. I borrow the term from Wikipedia, which most readers will know is a free content encyclopaedia which is written collaboratively and allows users to edit its content. It relies on having a large number of users who will contribute and update entries, and on the collective knowledge of the group to adjust incorrect entries and facts. This model of online collectivism has come to dominate the production of knowledge in Web 2.0. Digital cultures commentator Jaron Lanier (2006, 2010) describes this as an investment in the concept of the 'hive-mind', or the 'wisdom of crowds'. He argues that, although the process of online collectivism is marketed as a democratic or meritocratic process, it could also be characterized as a form of 'Digital Maoism' in which individual viewpoints become subservient to dominant collective ones. As he notes,

> it's important to not lose sight of *values* just because the question of whether a collective can be smart is so fascinating. Accuracy in a text is not enough. A desirable text is more than a collection of accurate references. It is also an expression of personality.
>
> (Lanier 2006, emphasis added)

I would add to this that a desirable text also contains space for alternative and competing viewpoints. It is not only accurate, but a reflection of human diversity and plurality.

Wikipedia is a good example of how the belief in the wisdom of crowds is put into practice in Web 2.0. Since its launch in 2001, Wikipedia has grown to become one of the

largest and best-known web-based reference sites. As of January 2010, it was reporting 68 million visitors monthly, with more than 91,000 active contributors working on more than 15 million articles in more than 270 languages. Articles posted to Wikipedia are available for editing by any user in real time. The idea which underpins Wikipedia is that, with time, the process of collective editing will mean that articles will settle on a reasonably fixed consensus. Extreme and controversial viewpoints are either actively edited out by the editorial team or effectively 'drowned out' by majority viewpoints. While Wikipedia itself has specific policies in place which attempt to deal with presenting a range of viewpoints and a neutral point of view, preserving much of the process of editing in article histories, many other sites do not have such policies. The logical end product of this collaborative process of editing is that majority views are eventually settled on, but divergent viewpoints can be significantly edited and altered along the way. Because the Web is constantly being edited, it is not an archive in a traditional sense as it never remains static. Although it is possible to access a history of changes to the content of pages in Wikipedia, many other websites are not like this. This means that information can be edited and erased very easily.

Lanier's criticism is aimed not so much at Wikipedia itself, as how it is used. Because it represents a collective viewpoint, and 'false information' (another way of describing individual and alternative viewpoints) is quickly edited out, it has been attributed status both as an authority and a form of 'truth', and perpetuates a belief that the collective is somehow all-wise. It is worth reflecting on the implications of this process for our understanding of the recent past. Given the increasingly heavy reliance of writers and journalists on the Web as a source, the collaborative process by which accounts are re-written to form a consensus and the ways in which certain large groups in society are unable to contribute due to censorship or lack of access to technology, we are living in an age when individualism and pluralism are being rapidly eroded, and alternative viewpoints are edited to provide 'smooth' and consistent narrative accounts. If we recall Appadurai's suggestion that the electronic media have had a significant effect on 'the work of the imagination' through the simultaneous circulation of images and commentary on them, then this tendency for online materials to appear as an archive when they are in fact constantly evolving has significant implications not only for the ways in which the events of the recent past are recorded and remembered, but also for the ways in which possible futures are imagined and enacted. Indeed, as Bolter and Grusin point out, contemporary media employ a 'double logic of remediation'. 'Each act of mediation depends on other acts of mediation. Media are continually commenting on, reproducing, and replacing each other, and this process is integral to media. Media need each other in order to function as media at all' (2000: 55). What this amounts to is a recursive process by which existing sources reinforce new ones and mob thinking is prioritized over individuality and plurality.

'Archaeologies' of the electronic mediascape

What role might archaeology develop for itself in the world following the widespread adoption of Web 2.0 and its 'wisdom of crowds' model of collaboration? This has been a

question which has received some attention, particularly by contributors to the journal *Internet Archaeology*; however, much of this writing has focused on issues such as the re-orientation of archaeological data presentation as a result of new media (e.g. Huggett 2004), and not the idea of an archaeology of the internet itself. Indeed, against the background of the situation described, I argue that there is an increasingly urgent need to develop an 'archaeology of now', with a dual focus on material evidence (which could form the basis for alternative accounts and interpretations of the recent past) and the excavation of virtual media to reveal the power structures and micro-histories of its dominant narratives.

Outside archaeology, authors have increasingly emphasized the materiality of digital data and the need to approach electronic objects as material objects (e.g. Hayles 2003; Kirschenbaum 2002; Manoff 2006), while anthropologists have stressed the ways in which online and offline worlds are increasingly influencing one another (e.g. Boellstorff 2008; Miller and Slater 2000). Within archaeology, Michael Shanks has recently argued that archaeologists must attend to three key points about media and their relationship to the design of information:

- Data are material.
- Information is a verb.
- Media are modes of engagement.

(Shanks 2007: 288)

The importance of perceiving data as artefacts has also been highlighted by Graves-Brown (2009) in his discussion of software as 'tools' (see further discussion in Harrison and Schofield 2010). Elsewhere I have made a case for a cyber-archaeology which encompasses not only a study of computer hardware and software but also the study of virtual communities and their artefacts (Harrison 2009; for alternate perspectives on archaeology and digital artefacts, see Morgan 2009; Webmoor 2008; Witmore 2009). As the line increasingly blurs between work which is undertaken using computerized hardware and software, we need to turn our attention, as a discipline with a focus on material culture, to the role of *virtual* artefacts. It is no longer tenable for us to focus on the hardware that enables online social interaction. Increasingly, it is software and virtual technologies which produce both effect and affect, both in the online and the offline world. This happens in a number of ways, from the purely representational (e.g. the use of software as tools for the production of plans by engineers and architects), to the physical (from the use of software systems to control traffic flow to the use of online communications to mobilize communities of sentiment to undertake protest or other forms of collective action). We are also seeing the emergence of increasingly hybrid forms of online and offline life (Greenfield 2006) and a re-conceptualization of the gap between 'humans' and 'non-humans' (e.g. papers in Featherstone and Burrows 1996; Hayles 1999). Archaeologists must begin to fill a gaping void in turning to study the nature of virtual material culture and its relationship with contemporary life.

Many internet users are unaware of the existence of the 'deep web', material which exists below the 'surface web' which is not returned by a conventional web search engine. The existence of the deep web relates both to the ways in which search engines prioritize

sponsored websites and search only indexed pages which contain static content, and the active concealment of data by users. Dynamic content refers to information stored in databases which can be returned only in response to specific direct queries, which are unsearchable using conventional web search engines and remain hidden to casual users. In 2001 it was estimated that at the time the deep web was between 400 and 550 times larger than the surface web, and that, while 95 per cent of the deep web was publicly accessible, the information could not be mined using conventional search engines (Bergman 2001). A search on the term 'deep web' reveals a whole series of metaphors to describe defunct or inaccessible web data – 'dead address space' (web addresses that no longer function), 'darknets' (online networks that are actively concealed from non-users) or 'invisible webspace' (Beckett 2009). However, the existence of a subterranean 'deep web' provides more than a metaphor for the role of archaeology in excavating the internet. It provides a challenge for archaeologists to develop a new series of methodologies for interrogating virtual technologies and excavating online data sources. Some of these methodologies may employ a Foucauldian archaeological metaphor and simply involve 'excavating' the traces of edits to Wikipedia pages or other online sources, but such a process has the potential to reveal important information about the dynamics of knowledge production in the twenty-first century. One recent example of this process in action was the so called 'Climategate' scandal in which e-mails and other draft documents were hacked from a server used by the Climatic Research Unit of the University of East Anglia, which, some climate change sceptics argued, showed their published data had been manipulated. The data were subsequently subjected to detailed public analysis, a process which exonerated the scientists from any wrong-doing or manipulation. This process itself could be argued to be 'archaeological' in the sense in which it involved 'excavating' edits to documents and placing them alongside e-mails sent between key protagonists to give context to those edited documents. Like physical excavation, the textual excavation produced data that have been interpreted in different ways by different protagonists based on their political orientation. Other methods may be more conventionally focused on (virtual) material culture. Elsewhere (Harrison 2009) I have suggested that an examination of the histories of creation, ownership, copying and re-use of objects within the virtual world of Second Life should be considered a form of archaeology which focuses on time depth, context and materiality, showing how a focus on virtual material culture can help us to understand the dynamics of virtual communities.

Notes towards an archaeology of the present

I want to return now to my earlier discussion of Web 2.0, 'mob thinking' and the disappearance of diversity and active erasure of alternative viewpoints in contemporary reportage and history-making. We might think of the removal or disappearance of data as a *taphonomic* process which influences our ability to work on internet archaeologies. But perhaps more importantly, archaeology's particular perspective on the material remains of the past (be they virtual or actual) provides an opportunity to generate alternative perspectives on the recent past which derive from our relationship with material culture. This is not an issue of archaeology being 'evidentiary' or representing some physical truth

'out there' beyond the 'biased' accounts on the Web. Archaeology is an intervention in the present; the things we study are generated in a symmetrical relationship between people and things (Webmoor 2007; Webmoor and Witmore 2008; Witmore 2006). But the power of material things to provide a focus for alternative viewpoints when they are made to intervene in contemporary public debates is beyond question. We have seen the recent emergence of an important role for archaeology in providing a touchstone for public debate in relation to the interpretation of a wide range of recent historical events – whether this be through the therapeutic function of bringing to light the location of civil war dead in Spain (e.g. González-Ruibal 2007), revealing the repressive military dictatorships and the material remains of state-sponsored terror campaigns in Latin America (e.g. Zarankin and Funari 2008), the use of forensic archaeology in war crime and homicide trials (e.g. Steele 2008; Sterenberg 2008), an involvement in indigenous land rights issues in Australia (e.g. Harrison 2005) or through contributing to an understanding of the nature of contemporary homelessness and poverty (e.g. Zimmerman and Welch 2006). However, it is no longer possible to believe that only physical 'things' are active. We need to develop a new archaeology for an increasingly virtual world, in which we transform our discipline into one which uses its privileged role in the study of material culture not only to provide alternative accounts of the recent past and present, but also to develop new methods which allow us to address ourselves to virtual material cultures. It is only when we adopt an approach which acknowledges the past as contingent, fragmentary and open to interpretation that we allow for a present which is not closed, but open to many possible futures. By addressing ourselves explicitly to the present, we make a case for archaeology's engagement across disciplinary boundaries with issues of contemporary social and political concern (Harrison and Schofield 2010; Piccini and Holtorf 2009). In doing so, we forge a role for archaeology in the production of imagined futures by inviting multiple perspectives on the past and the present as something which we are still in the process of making.

'We are all archaeologists now'; conclusions

In this paper I have described changes in the nature of contemporary history-making which derive from a widespread reliance on what has been termed the 'wisdom of crowds' in Web 2.0 electronic media. This relates to broad transformations within the mediascape, the nature of electronic communications and the networked character of the Web. I have argued that this 'crisis' provides a persuasive argument which sits alongside and supports several others which have previously been put forward for the development of an archaeology of the present. While we need to acknowledge the importance of new electronic communicative technologies in forming alternative communities of interest which might challenge the hegemony of the nation-state (Appadurai 1996), we need to treat the imagined futures which are produced by the mediascape as partial and contingent, and open to intervention. Archaeology has a key role to play not only in (literally) providing material with which to build alternative accounts of the recent past, but also in helping to understand the fundamental changes in our relationship with 'things' which is emerging as a result of new virtual

technologies through developing approaches to cyber-archaeology and the study of virtual material culture.

The archaeology of the contemporary past is a form of 'autoarchaeology' (Harrison and Schofield 2009, 2010) – an archaeology of 'us'. In that sense, it needs to remain open to the broadest public intervention and interpretation by encouraging the creation and collection of multiple accounts of contemporary events. Archaeology has a key role to play in presencing absence within contemporary society, as a form of material witness (see further discussion in Harrison and Schofield 2010) which can intervene in the mass media's 'plague of fantasies'. As I have noted, the nature of post Web 2.0 media means that late modern societies have rendered much of their recent past unknowable, by processes of either active concealment or passive forgetting. Rather then promoting multiple perspectives on the present, the saturation of media coverage has often led to the formation of dominant accounts of the recent past, based on majority viewpoints, which become surprisingly 'solid' and difficult to challenge. Archaeology has a role in such circumstances in presenting *material* evidence which can challenge, provoke, confront, and around which to develop multiple perspectives on the recent past and present. But, equally importantly, archaeology is a discipline which can help us to understand the *virtual* through a consideration of its material culture and the impact of digital technology on social relations and contemporary life. It is only by addressing such key issues that archaeology will develop for itself a critical social and political function in contemporary society in the twenty-first century.

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