

## **Introduction: Digital Communities**

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Digital technologies offer the promise of possibility. The programmability and malleability of digital networks and media suggest new ways of conceiving of human interactions, no longer shackled by the limitations of material space and linear time. In the asynchronous and immaterial world of the virtual, communities of discourse, practice and affiliation appear free to coalesce and dissipate based on the needs or whims of their respective users. Yet digital communities are also inevitably shaped by constraints, including both technical and procedural rules determining what acts and utterances are permissible within their bounds. And digital communities are grounded in material contexts – from the immediate sociality of collaborative filmmaking to the global reach of diasporic networks, which are defined by their participants' lived commitments to spaces of both origin and arrival. It is these constraints – material, technological, social, spatiotemporal – that provide the unifying theme for this issue. The freedoms of digital production and consumption are balanced by an array of rules and limits: examples discussed here extend from the physical limitations of 'mobile filmmaking' to the regulated process permitting Chinese viewers to overlay text comments on streaming images, and from Google Maps' enlistment of user labour to the ethics of Facebook groups in institutional settings.

Yet our emphasis on constraints is not intended to portray digital communities as some failed utopian project. In many cases, constraints themselves become a source of productivity – whether creative, social or political. The 48Hours Film Festival has been an enormously popular film competition partly because of its productivity in building community across the tight temporal constraints of one sleepless weekend. As quality may often vary, the most predictable outcome is often the formation or consolidation of creative networks essential for future projects, both digital and analogue. The temporal constitution of filmmakers' collectives, as described by O. Ripeka Mercier and Challen

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Wilson, is one in which Maori epistemologies like whakapapa (who), kaupapa (why) and tikanga (how) can also be conceived as genealogical mediations that inform and shape cultural and social group practices. These filmmaking practices include the cultural imperative for the camera to 'behave' and follow the rules of the marae or malae, and 'not be too intrusive about how it's looking' (16). In this process, the temporal constraints of the competition were themselves foregrounded and discursively challenged, such that time could not be too 'banky', to use Terese McLeod's words, making way for the acknowledgement of mihimihi in creative practice and collaborative labour (Mercier and Wilson, 17). In response to Taika Waititi's assertion that no other filmmaking environment provides as much 'fun and freedom', Mercier and Wilson's exploration of the 48Hours Film Festival also shows the role of affect as a vital component of communal production and one in which kai, whanau and commentaries also invite and (re)create communal networking, labour and play. Indeed, under the constraints of ability, experience and time, the end result is less qualitative than social and affective, returning us to Waititi's productive notion of play.

Productive constraints emerge not only in those communities defined by affective play (such as filmmaking competitions) but also in relation to communities of consumption. It may take the form of specific artefacts (whether audiovisual or text-based), but also manifests itself in performances of sociality. We can see such productive sociality in the 'bullet-curtain' websites discussed here by Meng Xu, in which the delimited space of broadcast media is transformed into a zone of relationality, where viewers can post their own real-time comments on what they are viewing, as well as reading others' fleeting contributions. On social media sites like Aful or Bilibili in China or Niconico in Japan, through phone apps that interact with live television programming and in some instances cinema, comments appear synchronically or asynchronously as overlays or 'bullet curtains' on a given media text, and in turn prompt responses from others simultaneously viewing the text. Enormously popular in China and Japan, these media practices enact material and discursive manifestations of specialist communities, such as otaku in Japan and zhai in China, that have often been socially stereotyped as figures *outside of* community.

But productive sociality is also visible in more fraught contexts, such as the student-run Facebook groups discussed by Luke Goode and Suzanne Woodward, in which the 'digital aggression' of unflattering or offensive posts about other members of the community can lead nonetheless to fruitful debates over the 'rules' of the online-offline social world of the university. Indeed, the movement between virtual and actual spaces seems itself to be a source of productivity, if we consider social media's capacity for fostering communities of political and linguistic affiliation, as demonstrated by Paula Ray's discussion of diasporic Indian communities on Facebook. The productive movement between the virtual and the physical is also exemplified by the physical labour that supplies Google Maps with digital content captured by users as they traverse real landscapes. Michael Daubs and Kathleen Kuehn's study of Google Trekker's collective group labour process reminds us of what Charles Tung has elsewhere called the

'compressive force of global simultaneity' (520). While Tung speaks of the radical spatio-temporal effects produced by modernity's new technologies of transport, coordination and communication, today's digital compressive force produces what Daubs and Kuehn describe as 'a convergent form of "physical digital" labour' that is both manual and digital, material and immaterial (75). In such cases, the channelling of social and material productivity to benefit advertisers and large corporations adds another dimension to the picture. Productivity is thus not only to be understood in neutral terms, but as a phenomenon that is itself subject to conflict and negotiation in relation to questions of labour and ownership, benefit and harm. Engagements with productivity, and the constraints that both generate and delimit it, are thus a key aspect of contemporary digital communities. In the pieces collected here, digital communities are defined not by their immateriality but by the way in which they overlay actual and virtual spaces, synchronous and asynchronous temporalities, and direct and mediated relations.

### **References**

Tung, Charles. 2016. 'Baddest Modernism: The Scales and Lines of Inhuman Time'. *Modernism* 23(3): 515-538.