

# **Editorial Introduction to Issue 9(5): Standard Issue featuring Special Section of Interviews on Neoliberalism, Media and Power**

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This issue of *Networking Knowledge – Journal of the MeCCSA-PGN* is a standard, unthemed issue of full-length, peer-reviewed articles, a review essay and reports from early career researchers, as well as a special section of interviews with established scholars on the theme of Neoliberalism, Media and Power. This is only the second standard issue of the journal – the first being published last year (8.3) – and the first time the journal has featured a special section, while the inclusion of interviews with senior colleagues and specialists in a particular domain has now become routine.

Among the articles, review essay and reports, there are theoretical engagements with digital materiality and the environmental humanities, animation and apparent movement, photography and the archive, privacy and surveillance, mobile money and assemblage theory, e-ethics and digital research methods, and with Christian Fuchs's work on social media. There is also practice-based research into animation and kinetics, and crowd-sourced methods of investigating music consumption practices, as well as practice-based accounts of archiving and the governance of research ethics.

The issue also includes a special section on Neoliberalism, Media and Power, featuring interviews with Des Freedman (Goldsmiths College, London), Terry Flew (Queensland University of Technology, Brisbane, Australia) and Sean Phelan (Massey University Wellington, Aotearoa New Zealand).

## **The Articles**

Amanda Starling Gould opens the issue with her article, 'Restor(y)ing the Ground: Digital Environmental Media Studies'. Critiquing the dematerializing tendencies of scholars who approach digital media in terms of either affect or algorithm, she presents her own digital environmental media studies (DEMS) framework, which shifts scholarly attention away from computation and towards an engagement with the earth and the environment. Responding to Richard Maxwell and Toby Miller's call for a *deep ecological materiality* and to Jussi Parikka's work on media ecology, among others, Starling Gould emphasises the need to consider the beginnings (e.g. minerals and metals) and the ends (e.g. wastes, toxins and pollutants) of digital media as critical sites for contemporary study.

In ‘The *D-Scope*: Mining the Gap’, Carol Macgillivray draws on animation, film and Gestalt grouping principles to develop the *D-Scope* technique, a way of creating apparent motion without using a camera, film stock or a screen. Providing a thorough overview of apparent motion and Gestalt psychology, as well as of the history of pre-cinematic techniques of representing motion, Macgillivray demonstrates how the technique she developed offers new perspectives on the perception of apparent motion, experienced and perceived on an environmental scale rather than being framed by a screen.

Jane Birkin considers the relationship between the material arrangement of the archive and its accompanying catalogue list in ‘Describing the Archive: Preservation of Space, Time and Discontinuity in Photographic Sequences’. Examining the diachronic nature of archival ordering systems alongside questions of narrativity and storytelling in photographic collections, she argues for the need to address the physical and contextual relationships between interconnecting units to understand the spatio-temporality of the archived image.

In ‘M-PESA: A Socio-Economic Assemblage in Rural Kenya’, Leah Jerop Komen examines the role of electronic payment and store-of-value systems that are accessible through mobile phones. Interviewing users of M-PESA (“M” for mobile and “PESA” for money in Swahili) in Kenya, she suggests that the motivations for its use have more to do with saving time than money, in contrast to the celebratory claims of its significance for international development. Drawing on DeLand’s assemblage theory, she demonstrates instead the complex relationships between mobile telephony, its users and social contexts.

Isla-Kate Morris then provides an overview of debates on digital research ethics in ‘E-Ethics and Higher Education: Do Higher Education Challenges Make a Case for a Framework for Digital Research Ethics?’ Drawing on her professional experience, Morris argues that research practices that deploy online methods are not supported by sufficient ethical guidance. Although universities are currently providing ethical review and guidance for projects using Internet Mediated Research (IMR) methods, she explores the gap between such guidance and the demands of research practice, and proposes a reframing of research ethics for online research.

## Review Essay

In his review essay, ‘Is Data the New Coal? - Four Issues with Christian Fuchs on Social Media’, Christoph Raetzsch takes Fuchs’s *Social Media - A Critical Introduction* (2014) as a starting point to take issue with Fuchs’s general approach to critiquing social media. Arguing that Fuchs erroneously dichotomises corporatized and grassroots social media, that he fetishizes data and “brings back Marxist critique in an archaic form”, Raetzsch argues that Fuchs’s account of exploitation and class struggle, and his association of power primarily with questions of ownership, obfuscate more than explain the new modalities, dependencies and power relations between operators and users of social media platforms.

## Interviews on Neoliberalism, Media and Power

The issue also features the special section, 'Interviews on Neoliberalism, Media and Power', featuring interviews with Des Freedman, Terry Flew and Sean Phelan. Representing three distinct approaches to the critique of neoliberalism – viewing it in terms of ideology, governmentality and discursive logics, respectively – these writers set out their particular approaches to media research in the context of their most recent work. Interestingly, while Freedman argues for the need to name neoliberalism and recognise it as an ideology, and Flew is sceptical of the over-use of the concept as well as the efficacy of ideology critique, both agree that their respective approaches remain distinct, and suggest that they cannot be reconciled. Phelan, on the other hand, suggests that the distinction between the two perspectives may have been overstated, and, drawing on both traditions, as well as others, he proposes instead a form of ideology critique that tries to avoid the weaknesses highlighted by governmentality. As well as neoliberalism, however, the interviews also address the wider research interests of each author.

In 'Media Policy, Media Reform and Media Power', Des Freedman discusses his work as an activist in the Media Reform movement, as a critic of media policy, and as a theorist of media power. Freedman explains his approach to media power as a material and relational property, distinguishing it from liberal pluralist, cultural studies and political-economic approaches. Discussing media power in the context of the recent BBC charter review process and the earlier Leveson Inquiry into the ethics of the British press, Freedman clarifies his proposal for a research focus on 'non-decisionmaking' in the policy field. Ultimately, he explains how guiding principles, programmes of action, and an understanding of the contradictory nature of media power are all necessary to bring about revolutionary reform.

In 'Neoliberalism, Voice and National Media Systems', Terry Flew discusses the continued relevance of the nation-state and national media systems in an era of globalization, and the need for cross-national comparative research in media studies. He also discusses the benefits of the concepts of 'voice' and 'participation' over 'citizenship' for evaluating media systems, and criticises the overblown and dismissive use of 'neoliberalism' as a rhetorical flourish, in favour of developing it as an analytical concept grounded in empirical evidence. Drawing on Foucault's work on both Weber and neoliberalism, Flew argues, helps us recognise the need for comparative work on institutions and national systems of government.

And in 'Understanding Neoliberalism, Media and the Political', Sean Phelan discusses the differences between 'ideological' and 'post-ideological' or 'post-political' neoliberalism, and sets out his own approach to critiquing neoliberalism, which draws on Laclau and Mouffe's discourse theory and Bourdieu's field theory. Arguing for the benefits of a comparative cross-national approach, he illustrates examples of 'actually existing neoliberalism' in UK, US, Ireland and New Zealand contexts. Phelan concludes the interview by suggesting potential sites of cultural politics and the possibility of a radically different kind of media and political culture.

Together, these three interviews constitute a clear snapshot of contemporary media research into such questions, and highlight the debates, issues and tensions that need to be addressed in future research.

## Reports

The issue ends with a couple of reports on recent initiatives. First, Abigail Blyth reports on the Data-PSST ('Debating and Assessing Transparency Arrangements – Privacy, Security, Surveillance and Trust') Seminar Series that has followed the unauthorised disclosures of Chelsea Manning and Edward Snowden. Organised by Vian Bakir, the series has addressed theoretical concerns and debates, the technical and ethical limits of secrecy and privacy, media agenda building, visible mediations of transparency, and transparency beyond the nation-state. The final seminar took place in June 2016.

Finally, as part of his masters and doctoral research into music consumption practices, Craig Hamilton has developed an online, crowd-sourced method of collecting stories and data from music listeners about their experience, through what he calls The Harkive Project ([www.harkive.org](http://www.harkive.org)). In this second report, Hamilton presents his project and wider research, as well as the ups and downs of pursuing doctoral research. The project will run for a 4th time on Tuesday 19th July 2016.