In Media Res

Christopher Andrew Sisk

Virginia Commonwealth University

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We are inundated by a constant feed of media that is in real time to the pulses and the dimensions of the surface, this in directed by hidden, automated controls and steered by political agendas. The transmission of information has evolved into a spiral of entropy, and the boundaries between author, content, platform, and receiver have blurred. This reductive space of responsive media is a catalyst for immense political and cultural change, causing us to question our notions of authority, truth, and reality.
A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University School of the Arts.

Drew Sisk
Furman University
Bachelor of Arts, Art and Asian Studies
Greenville, South Carolina
2010

Virginia Commonwealth University
Master of Fine Arts,
Design/Visual Communication
Richmond, Virginia
2018

Thesis Committee
Nicole Killian
Assistant Professor
Graphic Design

David Shields
Associate Professor
Chair, Graphic Design

Indrek Sirkel
Associate Professor
Head of Graphic Design
Estonian Academy of Art
Tallinn, Estonia

I am a child of the 24-hour cable news cycle. Every morning I woke up to the faint sound of the morning news coming from our living room. With talking heads in the background, my dad would fill me in on each day’s headlines and hand me his crinkled up copy of the local newspaper he had already pored over. I’ve been a news junkie ever sense.

“Do people really not read the newspaper?” This was my father’s constant refrain then, tinged slightly with a bit of evangelical judgement. He considered himself a witness to perceived ignorance, and he took to heart Thomas Jefferson’s argument that “democracy demands an educated and informed public.”

It wasn’t until later that I could begin to make connections and situate what I was seeing and reading within a broader global context. Where is this information coming from? What are the political motivations behind it?

Where are the contradictions? Whose voices are heard, and whose are suppressed? How does the format impact our perception? What are the consequences? As a graphic designer, I participate in this system and always contend with these questions.


I still wake up to the morning news, but now it comes mediated by the blue glow of my smartphone. I’m still constantly plugged in, but now I swipe through an algorithmically curated blend of hard news and politics with personal stories and memes on my Facebook timeline and Twitter feed. This environment is one of vulnerability and detachment, a movement toward hyperreality. My work critiques this flattened media landscape, cracking its veneer and exposing its absurdities.
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We are inundated by a constant feed of media that responds and adapts in real time to the impulses of our psyches and the dimensions of our devices. Beneath the surface, this stream of information is directed by hidden, automated controls and steered by political agendas. The transmission of information has evolved into a spiral of entropy, and the boundaries between author, content, platform, and receiver have blurred. This reductive space of responsive media is a catalyst for immense political and cultural change, causing us to question our notions of authority, truth, and reality.
O.J. Simpson’s white Ford Bronco races ahead of police down the highway in LA as seen from a camera in a helicopter above. Marshall Applewhite’s haunting eyes dart back and forth in Heaven’s Gate videos that play on a constant loop after the cult’s eerie, visually coordinated mass suicide coinciding with Comet Hale-Bopp. Nancy Kerrigan, the Olympic ice skater, cries in an arena concourse after suffering an attack planned by her heated rival, Tanya Harding. I distinctly remember a steady stream of sensationalized news stories as a child in the 1990s. These were all captivating, "made for TV" moments, images that powered the 24-hour news cycle. Spiraling out and superseding these original singular events, hyperbolic soundbites and looping images become the main content of consumption.

The 24-hour news cycle has given up its dominance to an equally sensationalized stream of content customized to our interests in real time and forecasting what will captivate us in the future. I open my phone and scroll through my Twitter feed, seeing activists react to the latest statements from Donald Trump right above memes mutating from completely different realms of my small slice of the social media universe. Scores and stats from basketball and football games weave their way in between. Friends, family, and complete strangers delve into rancorous debate on the veracity of a news story currently making the rounds on Facebook. Below these, acquaintances share live streams of police brutality and natural disasters uploaded by random people on the street. Politics, culture, and personal narratives are compressed in space and time, mediated by a set of standard devices.

Breaking news. Streaming now. Trending topics. The terms we use to discuss live media reveal how we consume it and its effect on us. If we break down the grammar, all of these -ing terms are in the present participle, meaning the action is in the midst of taking place, with no clearly defined start or end.
By the time we enter the feed, we are joining a space in media res, in the middle of things, to borrow from the well-used literary device. In cable broadcasts and social media feeds, there are no pauses, no time between events. We see a running feed, an unbroken stream without time to trace back to any single origin point. Everything is important and nothing is important at the same time. Each breaking news story or trending topic comes quickly and replaces what came before it. Time collapses and context spirals into entropy.

Structure

The feed runs on a standard grid that stretches and rearranges seamlessly to fit an expanding multitude of digital devices. The responsive grid of our devices is a rational structure that plays host to an irrational hierarchy, a space of simultaneous distance and proximity to each other’s real-time personal and collective narratives, to disaster and violence, and ultimately to political upheaval. The presentation and consumption of media has flattened our concept of reality, with consequences to our individual psyches and collective politics. Beyond the individual pieces of content we read or watch, the structures and mechanisms of the smartphone, social media, and the cloud shape us profoundly. Decades before widespread use of the internet, Marshall McLuhan argued that the mechanized means of communication supersede the power of the contents they hold, stating famously that “the medium is the message.” McLuhan says that we too often overlook the power of the larger apparatus of media:

“For the ‘content’ of a medium is like the juicy piece of meat carried by the burglar to distract the watchdog of the mind. The effect of the medium is made strong and intense just because it is given another medium as ‘content.’”

Posts, tweets, memes, and likes are the content, but psychological and political power lies in the structure itself, the omnipresent black box of the digital screen and the responsive grid holding it all together.

O'Donohue was promoted to the company he started. Take this quiz to find out who they are. May we honor their fallen brothers. We drive our power.
Physis and Techne
and the Suburban Ideal

The push and pull between physis and techne informs my investigation into the Anthropocene Epoch, the present era in which human activity alone makes the largest impact on global ecological systems. As Martin Heidegger writes, Physis is the natural world, anything that comes into being and fades away all on its own, specifically without human interference. Techne is a broad term meaning human intervention on nature. In this work, I am looking specifically at suburban development and its inherent irony. Suburbanites want to live alongside an idealized version of nature, but they alter and destroy the environment to make that possible. Instead of accommodating the natural world, they end up trying to control and contain it. Policy driven by the car-first suburban mentality isolates and addresses smaller issues related to the environment but fails to grasp the totality of our dilemma. The result is dislocation and fragmentation, a constant and uncontrollable formation, deconstruction, and reformation of the landscape.

My investigation includes a series of posters and a web-based interactive piece. The posters are examinations of common signifiers of suburban development—single-family homes with yards and driveways, cul-de-sacs, strip malls, and parking lots. Juxtaposed with these images and icons are fragmented photos from the natural environment around suburban Richmond, Virginia. An illustration of an idealized suburban landscape degrades, mutates, and rearranges itself across the compositions.

Viewers interact with the web piece, shaping the composition by shuffling the entire graphic at once or by moving individual squares. This restarts the cycle of degradation/pixelation. The composition constantly changes, transforming itself into endless configurations. Just as soon as we grasp individual pieces of the composition—a cul-de-sac here, a piece of the river there—the image degrades and reconfigures itself. Complete resolution is always out of reach. We affect one part of the system, but we never have a grasp of the whole. It never quite fits together, and it is impossible to fully resolve.

drewsisk.com/physis-techne/
Jesus said, “Do not be a legitimate resistance movement.”

1:43 PM — 1 May 2018
In 2007, lines of eager customers snaked around stores across the world to get their hands on the first iPhone. Almost immediately, content creators and designers were faced with the problem of how to adapt content designed for rigid desktop screen dimensions to the fluid, smaller dimensions of the smartphone. The interface vocabulary of mouse clicks and scrolls morphed into touch-screen swipes, taps, and pinches. In the world of user interface design, the concept of “responsive web design,” an umbrella term coined by Ethan Marcotte in 2010, became accepted doctrine. Users were now viewing the same content on a variety of platforms, and HTML, CSS, and JavaScript coding languages carried the power to serve it all up in infinite ways for each specific device. Eventually the “mobile first” concept of interface design became dogma, with every other platform falling in line.

Born as a legacy to modernism's attempt to rationalize and universalize the presentation of static text and images, the responsive grid became the standard framework for organizing an endless stream of constantly changing, post-structuralist online content, much of it ironically rebelling against the very ideals and notions that gave birth to the grid. Beyond its ubiquity as a way to cleanly serve up the same media on a variety of platforms of different size, shape, and resolution, the responsive grid takes on larger meaning as a manifestation of the hyperreal. The structure of the grid is fluid and adaptable, but its borders are ultimately rigid and impermeable. The apparatus is permanent, but what it holds is ephemeral and immaterial.

As smart phones steadily became more accessible and ubiquitous, social media use skyrocketed. Facebook was not the first social media platform by a long shot, but its birth as a single university-wide platform gave its users enough trust...
to engage each other using their real names instead of anonymous handles. This feature gave Facebook an authenticity that was missing from its predecessors, and it gained traction quickly. The exterior of truth and believability, presented within the reliable structure of the grid, foreshadowed the impact Facebook would have on media and politics in the coming years.

After Facebook gained global traction, ensuing social media platforms all moved toward reduction in terms of content and functionality, with the smartphone eventually becoming the primary way to use the internet. Twitter arrived in 2009 with a sparse premise: 140 characters to post whatever content users wanted to share. Several years later, Instagram launched a reduced snapshot-sharing platform, with its simple square photo box and caption—nothing more and nothing less. Each of these platforms had limited options for customization—users viewed content in boxes within an identical grid, styled the same way, and typeset in the same set of fonts as everyone else. Each social network borrowed, adapted, and reduced features from the other, boiling communication down to a system of “likes,” “favorites,” and “shares.” The concurrent proliferation of smart phones and social media solidified the mobile-first responsive grid as a container for all forms of content.

The widespread adoption of responsive web design coupled with the popularity of blogging and social media started to homogenize interfaces that housed a wide variety of content. Ease of use made Wordpress, Tumblr, and Pinterest popular platforms for blogging and content aggregation, and users embraced open-source templates that, while skinned differently, adopted the same set of traits—dynamic content, responsive grids, endless scroll, and above all else, a focus on social media sharability. As users became comfortable with the visual and editorial vocabulary of these platforms, the structures themselves started to drive the type of content users posted. The grid made possible the dissemination of an endless series of memes and trends, from the lolcat, to the BuzzFeed-style “listicle,” to the “Tumblr aesthetic.” The structure itself—the template, the grid—self-directs and even self-generates its content, creating, to borrow from McLuhan, an automated medium as message.

“The spectator’s alienation from and submission to the contemplated object (which is the outcome of his own unthinking activity) works like this: the more he contemplates, the less he lives; the more readily he recognizes his own needs in the images of need proposed by the dominant system, the less he understands his own existence and his own desires.”

—Guy Debord


Infinite Scroll is an investigation of the archive. Not its contents, but the spaces around, between, before, after, in the construction of, in the demolition of, in the presence of, and in the absence of the archive.

We are surrounded by the ubiquitous black screen, a continuously updating, highly individualized algorithmic archive with comprehensive memory.

Infinite Scroll

The feed is the contemporary archive, continuously loading and never static. All that remains fixed is the platform, structure, and container.

The feed flattens space, time, and distance. The horizon line collapses.

The feed is a Debordian spectacle, simultaneously distancing us from and blurring our personal lived realities and collective memory.

The feed carries the veneer of truth, an elastic substrate susceptible to subversion and manipulation.

The feed is never neutral.

The feed is always at our fingertips but always out of grasp.

drewsisk.com/infinite-scroll
on purpose tomorrow morning. They do such an incredible journey for this. I told the crowd in Oslo—You are a devil dog's best friend.
In Media Res

It’s time to waste being negative...
After looking at the evolution of the responsive grid as it relates to the rise of social media and the smartphone, we might ask: What are the larger implications of the flattened, reductive space of the device and its interface? What are the forces at play beneath the constant stream of media and the algorithms serving us all seemingly unique, dynamic content?

Architect and researcher Keller Easterling’s work surrounding what she calls “infrastructure space” provides an apt framework for dissecting the implications of the continuous feed and the responsive grid. Similar to McLuhan, Easterling argues that beneath the surface of large-scale infrastructure projects lies a hidden network of power outside the traditional channels of international governance. Easterling unpacks the difference between the forward-facing “object forms” and underlying “active forms” present in contemporary global infrastructure projects. Object forms are the bridges, free trade zones, and street grids that make up the built environment, while “active forms” are the political aspirations and maneuvering veiled beneath the glimmers of glass, metal, and cast concrete. Easterling argues that all infrastructure projects have a “disposition,” which “uncovers accidental, covert, or stubborn forms of power – political chemistries and temperaments of aggression, submission, or violence – hiding in the folds of infrastructure space.” 4

Applying this to our focus, what are the object forms, active forms, and dispositions of the omnipresent digital screen and responsive grid? As I have noted earlier, each successive development after the introduction of the smartphone has been a movement toward reduction and ease of use. Posts, tweets, memes, and likes are the object forms. Responsiveness is the active form. The stream and the feed take precedence over the static, and brevity is valued over long form.
The result is a constant state of saturation, of constant newness as McLuhan describes in "The Medium is the Message":

"Electric speed mingles the cultures of prehistory with the dregs of industrial marketeers, the nonliterate with semiliterate and postliterate. Mental breakdown of varying degrees is the very common result of uprooting and inundation with new information and endless new patterns of information." 5

This state of inundation is like Debord's concept of alienation in The Society of the Spectacle, where the capitalist spectacle holds individuals captive to "the contemplated object," distanced from their "own existence ... and desires." In the same way, the grid delivers automated, personalized alienation and inundation by means of algorithmic code.

In a recent e-flux journal article, a collection of artists and philosophers give our present condition a name: "strange universalism." The authors compare the ever-present black screen on electronic devices to Kazemir Malevich's Black Square:

"Today, The Black Square is any TV or phone screen that is switched off. The Black Square has become The Black Screen. Whatever is shown on screens today is mostly numbers posing as people. In contrast, The Black Screen does not present media realisms, but rather the reality of mediation. It doesn't show Reality TV, but demonstrates that proliferating screens are real. The black surface of the screen could be the exterior of the black-box algorithms operating behind it. In this case, The Black Screen becomes a documentary image of real-existing technology and its nontransparent mode of operation." 7

The content of the "Black Screen" and the responsive grid is self-reflexive. The apparatus is the content, and the medium is the message. The disposition of the responsive grid and the spiral of entropy is an extranational force that contains and generates momentous cultural and political shifts.

5. McLuhan, 7.
Harvest of blood and souls, the shrieking bloody harvest of parsnips and similar things.

8:49 AM — 2 March 2018
Cycles and Distortions

Responding to the headlines surrounding the inauguration of Donald Trump in January 2017, I initiated a series of studies exploring exaggeration and distortion. I began to see the relationship between the pages of printed matter and the individual frames in an animation. Instead of creating a moving image, these pieces stretch, skew, and fragment type, concealing and revealing legibility based on interaction and point of view. Accordion books afforded the opportunity to explore dualities and opposing ideas through the splicing of content.
during training. Jesus Christ, you have enough in life is one God and keep it! Hamas sends a message of the amazing gingerbread houses
In Media Res

Cycles and Distortions

found at Disney Parks Blog this week o’… Bhadreshkumar Patel, wanted for his birthday! UNDER THE STUNNING SKIES OF S. They’re now ready for
The introduction of imagery and the choice of color echo ephemera from political rallies or propaganda posters. The risograph printed pieces take on different meaning depending on their display. In banner form they draw attention to the surface; when crumpled on the table they become sculptural. The content is esoteric, and the forms speak in different ways. Something is happening versus something took place. An active communication versus a cast-off artifact.
Spectacle, Part I

The earlier studies through printed matter informed installations that move into larger-scale experiments using multiple forms of media. Spectacle, Part I is about contradiction, exaggeration, and hyperbole—an exposed wrinkle of the hyperreality of politics and media.

The teleprompter is an illusion, an optical trick we play along with so that we might believe that people of authority address us directly through eye contact without skipping a rhetorical beat. Here the teleprompter is flipped around—instead of an accessory to the podium, it replaces it.

We see the surface of the reflective glass and through it simultaneously. The glass is the mediator between the viewer and the scrolling text emitted below in mirror image. The text implicates the audience as both passive viewer and active reader. Two stretched out, warped banners frame the simulated teleprompter, suggesting the scene of an absurd political rally.

At once we stand at the point of view of authority and audience. At once we read from power and vulnerability. At once we contemplate mirage and reality.
Spectacle, Part II

Building on prior work, this installation is an exploration of politics and media, more specifically the role of public opinion. At a fundamental level, Spectacle, Part II is an investigation of control. In politics we often hear about the extent to which public opinion polls affect the behavior of candidates and elected officials. Politicians and media executives act in ways that preempt the latest Gallup polls, Nielsen ratings, Google analytics, and social media mentions. The result is an infinite, self-perpetuating, distorted loop that consolidates power and reinforces hegemony. This work is an attempt to unfurl the simultaneous power and illusion of public opinion to shape policy.
block of Sonia Court in Brevard County, Florida. Out of your dreams and fulfilling your destiny. Eric England doesn't need any more of
A pedestal with a joystick and button confronts viewers with an awkward invitation to interact with the piece. Moving the joystick and clicking the button causes the wave on the television screen to fluctuate in response, an allusion to the charts documenting public opinion polls. Viewers control the black wave, covering or revealing the live broadcast underneath, but little else changes as a result.

I continued exploring two-dimensional forms, such as banners, as sculptural elements or as ways to create immersive environments. In this piece, the main banner is even more exaggerated than in Spectacle, Part I. Viewers enter into it physically to interact with the screen and take command of the pedestal, which then acts as the missing lectern from Part I. This puts viewers in a place of control, which is simultaneously real and imagined.
proud of my father... When you go home? Take this quiz and find pasture. Dare to ask for it! Palestinian attacks have declined 30%. Stay
encouraged through the obstacle course. We have crisis-trained chaplains ministering to homeowners following recent terror events. Tips
@interwebcrier

Bernie should pull his endorsement of Illuminati of Bavaria, who control it & &.

7:49 AM — 23 October 2017
The boundaries of the responsive grid are impermeable and atemporal, but the content is dynamic, constantly updating and refreshing. Responsiveness is the disposition of contemporary media. Facebook notoriously uses algorithms that mine data from usage patterns to anticipate preferences and areas of interest in order to dynamically generate appropriate content. The platform buries posts it presumes particular users would not care for, and it elevates posts that align with their interests or relate to larger social, political, or cultural issues at the moment. Linear time collapses from the platform as it chases user interest and engagement. The social media algorithm is the back-end version of the responsive grid, hidden beneath the surface, but directing the entire system. What I see on my phone is different now from what it was two minutes ago, and it will surely be different from what you see if you look at your screen at the same time. But we both stare at the same grid lighting up the same infinite window.

In the same way that algorithms serve content on the responsive grid, they also generate content. Hackers and programmers create bots and spam that infiltrate and subvert the structure of online media, manipulating and monetizing search engine optimization and web traffic. In an endless looping cycle, the same code that destabilizes the apparatus is then co-opted and made mainstream. The same mechanism that spews spam into the comments of news articles and trolls people on forums is picked up and repackaged into customer service chat bots for Amazon and Verizon. The responsive grid is simultaneous host to subversion and co-optation.

The smartphone not only allows users to consume content in new ways, but it also allows them to create and disseminate it easily. This has been one of many factors that
has disrupted the traditional structures of mainstream media. Stories from traditional media outlets merge with content generated from both real users and algorithms, forming a homogenous stream, all conforming to the parameters of the responsive grid. The black box and the responsive grid gradually morph from a digital supplement to real life into a layer of reality itself. Here the disposition of the grid and the feed is one of Debordian spectacle:

“Lived reality is materially invaded by the contemplation of the spectacle while simultaneously absorbing the spectacular order, giving it positive cohesiveness. Objective reality is present on both sides. Every notion fixed this way has no other basis than its passage into the opposite: reality rises up within the spectacle, and the spectacle is real. This reciprocal alienation is the essence and the support of the existing society.”

The line between digital and physical collapses, the space between algorithm and human blurs, and reality is subsumed as just another interface.

Our new normal is a condition of “strange universalism,” under the overarching disposition of the responsive grid. Hito Steyerl writes about the internet as a pervasive space that spreads out and “moves offline”:

“The all-out internet condition is not an interface but an environment. Older media as well as imaged people, imaged structures, and image objects are embedded into networked matter. Networked space is itself a medium, or whatever one might call a medium’s promiscuous, posthumous state today. It is a form of life (and death) that contains, sublates, and archives all previous forms of media.”

Steyerl’s “internet condition” is an extension of Debord’s spectacle. Time, space, specific content, and even the rule of law become flattened and governed by a responsive grid that seeps out of the “Black Screen” into our individual and shared lived experiences.

“The all-out internet condition is not an interface but an environment. Older media as well as imaged people, imaged structures, and image objects are embedded into networked matter. Networked space is itself a medium, or whatever one might call a medium’s promiscuous, posthumous state today. It is a form of life (and death) that contains, sublates, and archives all previous forms of media.”

—Hito Steyerl

8. Debord, 8.

Reality Peripheries

This publication is an investigation of the seemingly innocuous boundaries put between us and centers of power. What is the disposition of an ever-expanding perimeter of temporary barricades? In the same way the screen mediates messages of power through reflection and projection, physical barricades mediate proximity with tools of distance and deflection.
The disposition of an ever-expanding perimeter of temporary barricades.
The illusion of distance.
False equivalence.
The mirage of proximity.
Society of spectacular totality.
Sought out, happened upon.
Closer, further, farther away.
children wounded by... Get the details behind Princess Ball...
The Demilitarized Zone, border between Republic of Korea and Democratic People’s Republic of Korea, October 2017

White House security perimeter, Washington, DC, July 2017
Responsive Politics

Immense political power sits within the disposition of the responsive grid. A series of large-scale geopolitical shifts have transpired alongside the growth of the smartphone and social media. Activists relied heavily on Twitter and Facebook to organize protests during the Arab Spring in 2011. At the same time, people around the world received news of the developments instantly on their devices, embedded between unrelated quips and snapshots on their feeds. Media space became flattened — timely stories from Egyptians on the ground in Tahrir Square became much more valuable than the reporting from mainstream media outlets on the outside. The responsive grid helped enable the revolution and disseminate its images outside the Middle East. The key to its success was the decentralization of the movement, made possible by social media. Grassroots leader Wael Ghonim summarized the collective efforts:

“Our revolution is like Wikipedia, okay? Everyone is contributing content, [but] you don’t know the names of the people contributing the content. This is exactly what happened. Revolution 2.0 in Egypt was exactly the same. Everyone contributing small pieces, bits and pieces. We drew this whole picture of a revolution. And no one is the hero in that picture.” 10

The Arab Spring was an open-source effort made possible by the grid. In this case, social media and the smartphone became tools to subvert and evade government restrictions in service of political change.

The 2016 election cycle gives us a glimpse into the murkier side of the political disposition of the responsive grid. By this time, social media use and smartphone culture had taken root across the spectrum of age, political persuasion, and socioeconomic classification. Donald Trump was made for the era of responsive politics. His endless stream of headline-grabbing tweets appealed to a swath of Americans resistant to the change spurred by
global connectivity and the rapid pace of social liberalization. Reactionary nationalist groups across the globe began to come out of the woodwork, connected in back corners of the internet and empowered by social media. These forces, housed within the structure of the responsive grid, combined to destabilize traditional media outlets and undermine centuries of global political conventions.

During both the British European Union withdrawal referendum (“Brexit”) and the US presidential election, external players exploited social networks and media outlets to directly influence public opinion. Under the auspices of the Kremlin’s Internet Research Agency, Russian hackers exploited Facebook’s algorithms, buying advertisements and injecting sensationalized and fake headlines related to the British and American elections.11 Fake news enterprises launched in eastern Europe and schools even popped up in Macedonia to train unemployed young people in the lucrative art of media deception and subversion.12 Both independent and state-sanctioned programmers exploited the echo chambers that social media had become. Algorithms made it possible for users to never see content that challenged their beliefs. Sharability is part of the disposition of the responsive grid—seeing a close friend share a news article gives it instant credibility and viability, no matter if its content is true or not. By 2017, 67% of Americans said they got news from social media,13 and the responsive grid has given every piece of content the veneer of veracity.

The screen and the algorithm render all media equal, regardless of accuracy or relevance. All content is malleable. Stories become detached from their origins, instantly extracted, recontextualized, and re-skinned on the grid. The dissolution of the media landscape has produced an infinite scroll of hyperbole and misconstruction, blurring our notions of truth and reality. The feed is home not to reality, but to simulation and hyperreality, “the generation of models of a real without origin or reality,” as Jean Baudrillard writes.14

“Our revolution is like Wikipedia, okay? Everyone is contributing content, [but] you don’t know the names of the people contributing the content. This is exactly what happened. Revolution 2.0 in Egypt was exactly the same. Everyone contributing small pieces, bits and pieces. We drew this whole picture of a revolution. And no one is the hero in that picture.”10

—Wael Ghonim

Spectacular Totality

Spectacular Totality investigates issues of political theater and “fake news” through the development of Twitter bots that mine headlines from the political hinterland to generate new, often absurd content continuously. A live “broadcast” with a news anchor avatar gives uncanny visual form to the content from the bot. This work points to a world in which the news cycle is always present, generating and even consuming its own content, with real political consequences.

We've seen the impact of fake news campaigns on global politics recently, as programmers unleash fake news sites and bots that appeal to people at the extreme ends of the political spectrum. Besides influencing people in middle America on social media, these fake news stories make it all the way to the top. Donald Trump (akarealDonaldTrump if you doubted the veracity of his account) reportedly has four million bots among his Twitter followers, some of which he retweets from time to time. Respected news outlets such as the Washington Post have even quoted fake accounts in stories about North Korea. “Real news” sources have moved past being duped by bots, ironically embracing them as a new tool to quickly generate content in the age of constant breaking news.

The content in Spectacular Totality is not entirely fake. Avatars of Donald Trump and Kim Jong-un are placed in the foreground, confronting each other and viewers in between at eye-level. The words spoken by Trump and Kim are authentic, but they are simply transposed. Kim speaks Trump's words and Trump speaks Kim's words. We hear the same heated language from both sides, but it is delivered as a series of virtually indistinguishable social media-sized soundbites.

What does it feel like to enter the stage of political theater and stand between two rogue heads of state? What happens in the vortex of dissonance created by the transposed words of Kim and Trump and the fake headlines delivered by a big-brother-sized news anchor in the background? What does it mean to experience the political spectacle as mediated live by bots and avatars?

The eclipse is a metaphor for a mediated, spectacular experience. Millions of people become transfixed on something coming between us and something essential. It's a moment of revelation. We stare directly at the edge of the sun, the source, for a brief moment. The eclipse transcends cosmic happenstance. It exceeds reality.
In Media Res

With and the books of men, it does. This is what breaks bonds... Have you been rescued?...
Photograph: "Yes, happiness here every single day! Rafaël Per-
Alta’s heroic acts of kindness help keep the right mission-type order.

Spectacular Totality
The banner has been a reoccurring form in my work, and here it evokes a political scene. Its placement on the floor, still half rolled up, suggests a breakdown or transition, a story unfolding in media res.


@interwebcrier

LIVE TWEETING FROM INSIDE THE PRINTER

10:59 PM — 31 October 2017

info about the Spelling Bee Bandit, wanted for human traf-

cicul: It's going to accept what you're up against evil and un-Ameri-
Rapture

Rapture borrows heavily from reality to expose and exaggerate the veneer of the hyperreal. In this work, I am focused on the implications of the omnipresent responsive grid, the continuous feed of information, and content generated by algorithms. I am interested in how the presentation and consumption of media has flattened our concept of reality, with consequences to ourselves as individuals and to society as a whole. What are the cracks in the system? Where does it start to unravel? What are its edges and seams?

In this work, the grid and the feed form an oppressive, omnipresent force, visually alluding to cults of personality, authoritarian regimes, and charismatic religious figures. Building on the knowledge I gained from Infinite Scroll, I created a series of web compositions working with live content and continuously changing imagery. Content stretches and distorts to accommodate an endless variety of dimensions. I think of these as a growing lineup of live broadcast channels.

An evolution of the teleprompter concept from earlier work, the four-sided holographic talking head device gives simulated human form to content generated from continually working bots. Placed at eye-level, the anthropomorphized algorithm makes a step from the flat screen into three-dimensional space.
Rapture
executing gun crimes. He doesn’t take a knee on patrol near Ramallah. Soldier injured & receiving medical treatment in Israel as
What are different ways for automated content to manifest itself? I built a system that autoprints text generated by the bots. Every ten minutes we get a new print and a new message, functioning as a bot newswire.
Ministry of Culture bars all-white canvas shoes as sign of abating.

Unless you catch hackers in the fashion of a grudge over WikiLeaks, help them.

Russia Conspiracy!
Ultimate plus, snowflake meltdown.

Beire, really calling, pg.

More with afrem dump of OA.

Citizens flee in mass panic, New polls out today are very happy about release tomorrow.

Severed heads of European thinkers. A cloud of standards.

Sometimes you need to be true, I will be interviewed on the Nomos Night, Vilnius.

Reciprocity: At honored Police Officer Thomas Wood was shot. TODAY, LIVE A LIMITED TIME!
Your account has been locked.

Voice from the Top
@voicefromthetop

What happened?
Your account appears to have exhibited automated behavior that violates the Twitter Rules. To unlock your account, please complete the steps below and confirm that you are the valid account owner.

What you can do:
To unlock your account, you must do the following:

- Verify your phone number

Start
In the 2016 BBC documentary *HyperNormalisation*, director Adam Curtis weaves together a timeline that converges politics and technology, exposing how the world we live in became normalized through the machinations of business and government. Normalization evolves as the gradual, unnoticed process of forming new ideas of what constitutes our collective reality. Underneath it is the loss of a sense of where we were before and how our new normal came to be. These notions of normalization bring to mind Debord’s concept of the Spectacle, or, as I have called it in this context, the Spiral of Entropy that defines our relationship to media today. We are always mid-stream, losing touch with where we came from, unsure of where we are headed or why.

Information has become fragmented and weaponized, and the responsive grid is the battleground. Boundaries between governments, individuals, extremist groups, and media outlets are starting to collapse, their unique visual vocabularies and signifiers subsumed beneath the grid. As Murtaza Hussain argues,

“Propaganda and information warfare was once the purview of nation-states, militaries, and intelligence services. Today, even ordinary people have become important players in these campaigns. Battles over narratives and information have become an integral part of modern war and politics; the role played by bloggers, activists, and ‘citizen journalists’ in shaping narratives has proven vital.”

The most important frontlines might be the pixels constantly shifting and rearranging truth and reality on our devices. The Spiral of Entropy is relentless, uncontrollable, and always a few steps ahead of our grasp. The Spiral consumes and reacts against its own content, inverting and spinning inward, with an infinite scroll of geopolitical reverberations.

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In Media Res

In media res: entering in the midst of things.

What happens when you enter into the Spiral of Entropy and move through it in physical space?

In this culminating body of work, a live feed is generated by automated image searches and Twitter bots. Content is continuously changing and no surface is fixed, pointing to a dystopian present-future in which information is hyper-present, generating and even consuming itself. Every surface has the benign veneer of the continuously running feed we’re all familiar with. This is a physical space of inundation and confusion.

Bots construct an infinite scroll of new content, and algorithms serve us images and sounds from current events, politics, and the cultural zeitgeist. We also see instances of other spectacular and hyperbolic phenomena, referencing eschatology, cult figures, cults of personality, religious fundamentalism, rapture, and end times prophecy.

The mobile hologram alludes to Michel Foucault’s panopticon. The apparatus, placed at the center of the room, is constantly watching, listening, and recalibrating.

A continuing motif, the eclipse evolves into a glorified loading icon, a short-hand, a symbol that gains political and psychological charge through repetition.

Ultimately this is a live, automated system that is continuously running—systems within systems that are constantly refreshing and updating in real time. I am simultaneously enamored and unsettled by the idea of a system with such economy. I think about Guy Debord’s Spectacle and the efficiency and economy of power and control. I think about Keller Easterling’s object forms and active forms.

The regime of responsiveness.

The all-seeing eye of the algorithm.
when things aren't going your way to heaven and on his experience as a rescue pilot. Thank God for His favor today. I was a combat
artillery live-fire rehearsals during Platinum Lynx in Romania.

At with Eagle Scholar
8m

Winnipeg MB.
Process mimics concept. Beginning to think spatially, I created a series of responsive websites using movable tiles that can be projected at a large scale and mapped onto surfaces in an infinite number of configurations.
session... We put the promise in your life is going before you where you don’t have to realize Obama’s tax... No matter where He has...
given you grace to start, but you're not. Blast Brass'—A engages his target from close range. We stand ready to fight like hell for...
Craig John Oliver, a convicted felon: "I can only be "Dooms-day" for those impacted by data breach visit: NO INJURIES REPORTED'.

the presidency of - America is on site.

46m

That's 370 fewer weapons that could improve the Corps as our cell phones.

1h

THE ELECTION IS OVER.

1h

What are the people we love. On our knees could make a difference in the wake of the past.

1h

"I HOLD IN MY LIFE.

1h

In response to the NOAA's report - 2
In Media Res

ALTOS

TENORS

BASSES

TREBLES

Rachael Denhollander not only worship God, but come moving forward. Their job and make sure they’re always grateful. He road to

your morning tomorrow. Each week before lunch, but care.
together during their week w/. Helping those in the expanse of the Israeli coastline to finish. No person can stop you or push you
In Media Res

1 down. Our president is absolutely right in the country. Soldiers from the Gaza Strip to Southern Israel. Keep being a felon in

8:19 AM

Do not believe the heart of US republicans.

3m

Have been working hard for the mess our country well and have the Resistance he deserves.

23m

If you're in an exclusive look into the Clinton-Lynch tarmac meeting?

33m

Kim Il Sung University closes Latin, Ethics, and Pottery Departments.

43m
possess of child molestation charges: He offers if we neglect so great a salvation? Leslie Delbecq and her unborn child: God did
not know. Said Those of us here: We have to be somebody else. Before you start that matters, it's how you can see things begin to deal
The SMAW in a hurry. Take a look at the same addiction, the same. Says IDF did everything to avoid government shutdown. Help...
solve more parental kidnappings: Drop by the on August 3, in Kalamazoo, Michigan: My father has been arrested. God loves
In Media Res

them and said, 'Behold, how it happened and what it really means. Happy Mimouna to you, Sgt. He did say he would take what looks
In Media Res

Future high-ranking officers in the armed forces of a nation...
It's my prayer that God is surrounding what's surrounding you. Your dreams may look impossible, but God has...
In Media Res

You in the fight in the Caribbean devastated by Hurricane... Instead of feeding those hurts, start feeding your history; We all

In Media Res
Two monitors flank the projected banners, creating an in-between space for viewers to watch and be watched simultaneously. Text-to-speech technology mashes gallery visitors' words together with audio content randomly generated from online searches and played in the space, making gallery visitors an unwitting part of the work.
a peak of the week and into promotion. Earlier, we stopped an attacker with a gun and knife near the Ofer junction. In response to the

In Media Res
In Media Res

The greatest threats is easier said than done. There are justified concerns about hearing damage. He insists all Marines in Korea.
Look around, who can know it. Former President with daughter here still. NRA-ILA Leadership Forum is just another reason why is...
In Media Res

...important. God uses the journey to Israel. And I'm in Oslo, Norway, for one last time you see it. This is the ability to maintain...
@interwebcrier

HAUNTED BY GOOGLE ADSENSE

2:39 PM — 29 April 2018
My current work explores the literary concept of *in media res*, entering a situation in the midst of things without a sense of origin or destination. Ironically, making this body of work has allowed me to break apart that literary device on a personal level and begin to trace backward and uncover the sources that have been driving my work all along.

Coming out of this work, I would group the questions I am asking as I move forward into three categories: theory and concept, experience and immersion, and agency as the maker. I see these questions as bigger than this project alone. These are the questions that I will continue to contend with in future work. These questions are future-focused and backward-searching at the same time.

**ON THEORY AND CONCEPT**

Thinking about politics and media, how much of this work is about manipulation, sedation and abuse of power?

Should the work elicit a more visceral response? Should it become more agitating?

My grandfather frequently sends me chain letters through email, a collection of prophecies, conspiracy theories, and conservative propaganda. How can the concept of the chain letter be leveraged? What are the forces at play behind the act of reading and the compulsion to send and share? What is the performance of that language?

This work is a form of theater and stage craft. Bertolt Brecht’s work was about exposing the mechanisms of theater and heightening the absurdity of the experience. How is this work taking cues from the visual language of dramaturgy?

How can I push the eclipse icon, cult imagery, and ideas of omnipotence, revelation, concealment, and systems inside of systems?

What is the connection between the spectacle of evangelicalism and its ties to politics? How can concepts of rapture, alarmism, and hyperbole be leveraged?

I’m thinking about the performance of the pastor in evangelical traditions, the build-up to a climax in the service and the flattening of particular doctrines and prophecies. This tone and way of articulation is relevant to the work.

The avatar hologram is our way in. It’s a life preserver. It’s when the information tries to be like us, but it can’t. It’s at our eye-level, as if we might have a conversation with it and it might respond to us. There is a certain darkness and terror masked under the feed,
in what algorithms reveal and in relentless duplication. How can the work allude to that and create the illusion that something is following the viewer, eliciting a fear or paranoia?

**ON EXPERIENCE AND IMMERSION**

How does the work become more immersive or interactive? How might people in the space change something about what they’re seeing? How can this create a sense of disorientation?

What is the impact of scale? Viewers feel smaller than this content, which normally fits into the tiny window of their phones. How does this echo my research on the rapture and dystopia, this feeling of being smaller than something when you’re inside of it?

How does the work become portable and live outside of the room of the installation? Since the work is web-based, does it follow viewers individually on their phones?

In my thesis presentation we see the “thing itself” and then its representation. There’s a friction where those bump together, creating an edge or the lip. The focus is on the dissolution of media, but there’s a reliance on that edge, the legibility as a comparative device. We see fleeting moments of visual sync and alignment. The viewer is in the image and not in the image at the same time. How do I push this feeling of disorientation, tension, and paradox? Seeing ourselves in the space, do we become part of it? It’s a reflection of ourselves and where we are in it.

How do I leverage pacing of the content, and leverage the concept of consent (or lack thereof) in the realm of politics and media?

How do I alter the time-space continuum of the constant feed that we’re all used to seeing? How does this play out in different formats: on the web, in a physical space, in a piece of printed matter?

**ON AGENCY AS THE MAKER**

I am detached from the content of my work and immersed in it simultaneously, sitting in the shadows. Where is my agency here as the designer, apart from the auto-generated content from the bots and image searches?

Is there a dialectic of positive and negative in the presentation of content? Am I the synthesis or does the audience fill that role?

My presence in the work is asserted through aesthetic agency – this content is not purely a feed; instead, it has been highly curated and stylized.

**PUSHING AHEAD**

Questions lead to work that leads to more questions. It is clear that I have many questions to explore – and these questions will continue in the work I make after graduate school. The thesis exhibition is a good landing spot, a stopping point to present the latest iteration of my work.

One of the questions I have been wrestling with is the level of interactivity in my work as it stands now. In the current iteration of *In Media Res*, viewers see an automated system, but I, as the designer, am pulling the strings and setting the constraints. Moving forward in future work, I would love to create a truly responsive system, one in which viewers change the content that they see, either voluntarily, or simply by their presence alone.

Conceptually, I have much to unpack in regards to the spectacle of religion and politics. I am digging into my past experience raised in a conservative evangelical community and looking at the visual language of charismatic leaders, eschatology, and prophecy. While these are secondary or tertiary concerns in my current work, I could see elevating these concepts into another body of work.

My graduate school experience has been a good time to dig into deeper questions about what drives my work and my processes for research, making, and reflection. I have learned that constantly diving into new ways of working is essential for my practice. I have discovered that my work involves constantly evolving questions, a process that moves backward and forward simultaneously.
Bibliography


Agamben describes contemporariness as an elusive force, like flickering lights and moving shadows. To be contemporay is to be rooted in one’s own time but simultaneously outside of it. Agamben’s ideas have influenced my framework as a designer, to be inside and outside of content at the same time.


Baudrillard sketches out a world in which nothing is real and everything is a mere simulation, “the generation of models of a real without origin or a reality: a hyperreal.”


Curtis weaves together a timeline that converges politics, technology, and popular culture, exposing how the world we live in became normalized through the machinations of business and government over a relatively short period of time.


Debord’s concept of the capitalist spectacle contends that highly mediated experiences lead to mass distancing and alienation. The result is a losing of consciousness and the emergence of world in which the individual disappears and the spectacle self-generates and consumes itself.


Easterling, who comes from a background in architecture, unpacks the difference between the forward-facing “object forms” and underlying “active forms” present in large-scale infrastructure projects. What is the difference between the physical characteristics of infrastructure and its “disposition,” the political aspirations and maneuvering veiled beneath the glimmers of progress and global trade?


In this book, Eco marvels at the absurdity of the American obsession for creating facsimiles and reproductions that transcend reality itself.


Fisher argues that under the framework of “capitalist realism,” capitalism has such a firm grip on us that we cannot imagine any other kind of reality. Everything has been commodified through a system of capital equivalencies, and everything is run as a business.


Foucault discusses the Panopticon, a tower that sits in the middle of a prison in which an entire population of inmates are completely visible to the small number of authorities in charge. The inmates are cut off from each other but constantly being watched from the Panopticon. Panopticism is extended as a metaphor for modern society, ruled through the efficiency of centralized power. I link Foucault’s Panopticon and Debord’s Spectacle to the feed, the algorithm, and the screen.


Groys unpacks the conundrum that artists face through activist work – the objects they make are aestheticized, which he defines as a process of defunctionalization. Any real power they may hold to affect change has been stripped by the very nature of institutions that house it. I am interested in the implications of Groys’ ideas on aestheticization in a design context, where our work often disappears because of its utility. Where is the rupture between utility and defunctionalization in graphic design and how can this be leveraged?

In this text, McLuhan argues that too often we miss the true intention of media by only paying attention to the specific content we see. The true power is in the mode of delivery.


In this book, Metahaven looks at the ways technology has impacted forms of political protest. From tracing the origins of online memes to an investigation of “jokes as political tools,” they uncover how absurd acts destabilize even more absurd political situations. Of particular interest is the chapter called “Design,” in which they discuss the intersection of graphic design practice and indirect political action.


Metahaven presents a massive volume of essays and speculative design work that sits at the center of aesthetic and political inquiry. They argue that design has the unique power to unpack and unlock issues of geopolitical intrigue simply through the act of making things visible. They write, “Both the projection of power and the assumption of an image are ways to create a world and make it seem inevitable.”


Paulsen looks at the screen as a mediator of communication and the effects of “telepresence” and virtual reality. To what extent are screen spaces, interfaces, and networks illusions or realities, and how are artists navigating these contexts? I see a connection between Paulsen’s work and Jean Baudrillard’s thoughts on hyperreality in *Simulation and Simulacra*.


Published in conjunction with an exhibition and the release of a series of electronic projects loaded onto a USB stick, this experimental publication provides a critical look at the politics behind corporate identity, the absurdity of public relations efforts, and the collapsing of time. Beyond this particular piece, I am interested in Dexter Sinister’s mode of working at the conjunction of design, publishing, and contemporary art.


Hito Steyerl discusses “the all out internet condition,” a space in which the internet is pervasive force, seamlessly spilling out into reality. Steyerl’s internet and its associated images transcend the screen, “[migrating] across different supports, shaping and affecting people, landscapes, politics, and social systems.”


This group piece looks at the constant presence of the mobile device and how it affects our reality and our identities. The authors adapt Malevich’s “Black Square” into the “Black Screen,” the ubiquitous, all-encompassing platform that carries “not present media realisms, but rather the reality of mediation.”


Taylor and Harris provide a broad overview of seminal discourse on the impact of mass media on culture. Stringing together ideas from Benjamin to Debord, they focus on “the culture industry thesis— the argument that mass media culture is disproportionately commodified and systematized.”


In this text, Warner discusses the nuanced lines that separate “a public” vs. “the public” and the “counterpublics” that exist on the periphery. As I understand it, the lines are fluid between the three over the course of time, but what holds together groups of people is ultimately discourse and shared vocabulary.
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In Media Res
by Drew Sisk, 2018
drewsisk.com

Avatars and text-to-speech elements generated using SitePal. (sitepal.com)

Twitter bots built using the Twitter API and code adapted from Jacob Harris. (github.com/harris)

Image search bots built using the Giphy API and code adapted from Neal Shyam. (gist.github.com/nealrs)

Speech-to-text elements built using Google Cloud Speech-to-Text API. (cloud.google.com/speech-to-text)

Typefaces:

Saol, by Schick Tolkka (2017)
You don't have permission to

You don't have permission to

You don't have permission to

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You don't have permission to
The mechanisms of its production brought about its downfall.
A self-destructive automated system.
A collapsed political regime.
A dismantled religion.
The container is all that remains, finally at rest from the burden of its fragile content.
We are inundated by a constant feed of media that responds and adapts in real time to the impulses of our psyches and the dimensions of our devices. Beneath the surface, this stream of information is directed by hidden, automated controls and steered by political agendas. The transmission of information has evolved into a spiral of entropy, and the boundaries between author, content, platform, and receiver have blurred. This reductive space of responsive media is a catalyst for immense political and cultural change, causing us to question our notions of authority, truth, and reality.