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**PERSONAL EXPERIENCE, TURNED OUTWARD:  
RESPONSES TO ALIENATED SUBJECTIVITY**

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**Abstract:** The analysis of feelings and emotions in the public sphere has provided important insights about media consumption. This article aims to contribute to the debate by considering feelings and emotions from the vantage point of production. Specifically, it focuses on the production of texts that make a truth claim, where concerns about subjectivity and loss of mastery are particularly contested. To date, analysis of nonfiction textual production has focused primarily on news values in the mainstream media, giving rise to critiques of both the ‘objective’ ideal and a more subjective ‘tabloidisation’, with both perceived as inauthentic or alienated. When digital forms of nonfiction production are considered, it has tended to be in a binary fashion; the vices or virtues of professional media are contrasted with those of individual, ‘artisan’ new media production. The aim of this article is to identify criteria that might help to reframe the problem in a different way, allowing for the possibility of ‘alienated’ and ‘authentic’ qualities in both types of text. In particular it considers literary nonfiction, which typically works to connect facts and feelings, to see what one can learn from a hypothesised ‘poetics of fact’.

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The analysis of feelings and emotions in the public sphere has provided important insights about media consumption. An interesting parallel is drawn, for example, between the idea of a duped, passive subject of therapy and that of the duped consumer subject of mass society critiques (Yates, 2011). This article aims to contribute to the debate by considering feelings and emotions from the point of view of textual production, not consumption. Specifically, it focuses on texts that make a truth claim, where concerns about subjectivity and loss of mastery are particularly contested. This particular combination of interests is still relatively rare; the most notable example is an early mapping of ‘journalism as emotional labour’ (Richards, 2007). The comparative inclusion of digital forms is also unusual. To date, analysis of nonfiction production has focused primarily on the mainstream media, giving rise to critiques of both the objective ideal and a more subjective tabloidisation, with both perceived as being inauthentic. When digital forms of nonfiction production are

considered, it has tended to be in a binary fashion; the vices or virtues of professional media are contrasted with those of individual, artisan production, for example in personal blogging narratives. The mere fact of their professional or artisanal status becomes the basis for a judgment of value.

The aim here is to identify criteria that might help to reframe the problem in a different way, allowing for the possibility of ‘alienated’ and ‘authentic’ qualities in both types of text, and considering strategies to acknowledge those tensions. In particular, it considers literary journalism and other forms of creative nonfiction, which typically work to connect facts and feelings, to see what one can learn from a hypothesised ‘poetics of fact’. What follows is very much a work in progress; suggestions and comments are very much welcome.

The economic downturn that began in 2007, and public fury with all perceived sources of authority that followed, caused massive disruption for traditional media on top of the shocks of technological change. Although it would be wrong to blame any single group for the widespread failure to ask hard questions, the feeling that journalism is leaving an important gap in our understanding of the world around us, at a time when the need to make sense of it is greater than ever, appears to have shifted in the last few years from a minority stance to a broad consensus. The struggle by both consumers and producers of media to work out a new way of knowing what is real is arguably the struggle of our times.

Among practitioners, this has meant extensive soul-searching about where they may have gone wrong as professional ‘explainers’. In one such example, BBC economics editor, Evan Davies, acknowledged in a public debate that financial reporters ‘did not in any meaningful way warn the world what was coming’. To a large extent it was inevitable, he said, because of human bias and the complexity of the world being reported. But perhaps something could be done about the preference of traditional media for definite quantities rather than uncertainty, and a tendency to deal ‘with good versus bad, not what is “possible”’ (Davies, 2009, author’s verbatim notes).

It could be argued that there is already too much uncertainty. In *Blog Theory*, Jodi Dean characterises reflection as a form of capture in the current conditions of communicative capitalism because it goes ‘all the way down’ (2010: 11), becoming a reflection on the processes and conditions of reflection itself, with no possibility of agreement on the criteria that define meaning. The challenge then becomes one of breaking out of, or redirecting, this endless loop of reflexivity (2010: 31). It may be interesting, therefore, to consider whether

the different strategies for the telling of true stories that have emerged in response to the crisis in trust do anything to put meaning more within our reach. Besides the blog as lyric essay and the immersive forms of reporting found in literary nonfiction, both considered here, (re)emerging forms include graphic narratives; publishing by instalment; storytelling as performance and micro-nonfiction (Greenberg, forthcoming, a).

### **The possibility of an alienated subjectivity**

The platonic ideal of journalism as the record of an impartial truth, privileged throughout the long twentieth century, regularly comes under challenge during periods of crisis. Drawing on Nietzsche, Bakhtin, Benjamin and others, a debate has evolved around the idea of an ‘alienated objectivity’, in which the narrator is unengaged with an objectified other (Hartsock, 2000; 2011). The concept of objectivity in journalism has perhaps been misunderstood, as the term was originally used to define a consistent and transparent way of testing information through verification – a method of discovery – rather than a claim to be free of bias (Kovach and Rosenstiel, 2001: 70-91).

The philosopher Thomas Nagel draws a distinction between the two, questioning the notion of a ‘view from nowhere’ and encouraging instead an understanding of objectivity as the step backwards from a specific, acknowledged point of subjectivity in order to see the bigger picture: an attempt to ‘transcend our particular viewpoint and develop an expanded consciousness that takes in the world more fully’ (1986: 5). Reporting can be understood as a way of putting oneself in the way of discovery, creating a personal experience that is deliberately turned outward and tested by verification (Greenberg, 2010a). Definitions of verification vary, but the following principles are often cited; do not add things that did not happen; do not deceive; be as transparent as possible about your methods and motives; reply on your own original reporting wherever possible; and exercise humility (Kovach and Rosenstiel, 2001: 70-91).

Critiques of neutrality have tended to focus on making more explicit the tacit news values that govern the selection of stories, and the impact this has on media consumers. But especially in the US, where the objective ideal had been interpreted most strictly in terms of balance, criticism has increasingly focused on the violence that can be done to objectivity as a *method* by the practice of shallow ‘he said/she said’ reporting. An example given during 2011 concerned American ‘birthers’, who insisted – against all the evidence – that US President Barack Obama was not born in the United States. ‘Suppose [they] start winning,

and more and more people believe it. This is [not a defeat for one side of the argument; it is] a defeat for ... verification itself. Neutrality and objectivity carry no instructions for how to react to something like that. They aren't "wrong", they're just limited.' (Rosen, 2010a)

From the point of view of textual production, a more general problem arises. For the practitioner, all effective storytelling involves selection of story details or evidence at some level, as part of a rhetorical strategy to give the text unity and meaning. If the producer of the text refuses to take a point of view – to propose a thesis based on the evidence – it leaves the story as a collection of random details that are ultimately unsatisfying.

The concept of alienated objectivity and the problems it can pose, have been well mapped. But with the increasing role of emotion and subjectivity in the public sphere, a new question arises; what happens when the balance shifts the other way, and the narrator fails to engage not with the objectified *other*, but with his or her own, objectified *self*? Does this have the potential to create a new idealism – what I identify here as 'alienated subjectivity' – that is just as problematic as the much-derided ideal of objectivity?

To some extent the question is addressed in critiques of 'tabloidisation' of traditional media and confessional journalism, where the potential for an objectified self lies in the possible manipulation of the reader to respond in a prescribed fashion, and the lack of choice on the part of the author to choose an aesthetic freely. However, their scope is limited by a tendency to focus on the media consumer, not producer, and to conflate 'emotion' with sensationalism and bias, leaving a gap in the theorisation of emotion in news (Peters, 2011: 300). Instead of a Cartesian dualism that opposes emotion to rationality, it is proposed that the analysis shift towards 'considering each news text in terms of the rules of truth it employs ... and how these rules are manifested through a particular presentational style' (2011: 303).

To achieve a greater understanding of the role of emotion in public spaces, in conditions where digital communication is fast becoming the new 'mainstream', it is helpful to extend the analysis further still. The possibility should exist of finding an alienated subjectivity not just in professional texts that manipulate the consumer, but also in those created by artisanal producers; and of finding authenticity not only in marginal practices, but also in professional, mainstream ones.

By the same token, if a text's falseness or authenticity is no longer defined solely by its professionalism or stance towards objectivity, it becomes necessary to find a different way of distinguishing between the two. The aim of this article is to think aloud about that problem, and offer some possible approaches.

**Scenes from the blogosphere, part 1**

On December 14, 2010, the American filmmaker Michael Moore published a blog post explaining why he was contributing \$20,000 bail for Wikileaks leader, Julian Assange, who was fighting an extradition request relating to accusations of rape in Sweden. Moore went beyond a defence of Wikileaks and its role in publishing confidential government material, by naming the defendants and dismissing their accusations as an example of ‘how the [US] government works when it decides to go after its prey’ (Moore, 2010). He was not the only prominent progressive figure to take that stance. But because of a unique campaign on Twitter, Moore became the only one to apologise for doing so on national television, just a week later.

Moore’s nemesis was Sady Doyle, a writer living in New York, who published an arresting dissection of his rhetoric and issued a call for mass protest. The public was asked to send tweets to Moore, using the hashtag #Mooreandme, telling him why every rape accusation should be taken seriously ‘regardless of the accused rapist’s connections, power, influence, status, fame, or politics’ (Doyle, 2010a). The campaign would run, she said, until he offered an explanation and a \$20,000 donation to any organisation that campaigned against sexual assault. In the days that followed, many thousands of people tweeted their discontent to Moore, and Doyle recorded events as they unfolded on her blog site ‘Tiger Beatdown’. For a short while the site exploded with passionate abuse from Assange’s supporters and expressions of relief and praise from her widening circle of admirers, fought out in the comments threads. On Wednesday, 22 December – the day after the filmmaker’s televised climb-down and a personal, tweeted, apology to Doyle – she wrote: ‘Last night, I did something I hadn’t done in a very long time. I took a long, hot bath. I just lay there, and I started to feel how tired I was, and I started to feel less tense. And then I got up, and I went to my bedroom, and I laid down next to my boyfriend and my dog Hektor ... and I had a good night’s sleep. For the first time in a week.’

Many people use blogging to write about personal experiences, and the blogosphere as a public space for the expression of private emotions is well documented. What is striking about this example is the way the author uses craft to communicate feelings in a controlled and deliberate way, and to connect those feelings to argument and thought. To use the language of composition, a rhetorical ‘telling’ through persuasion and explanation is intertwined with the poetics of ‘showing’ through dramatised action and felt detail, unified by

the author's voice and translated to the page using any and all typographical, syntactical and other linguistic devices to hand. 'You may or may not know this,' she tells readers, 'but I have been going, on Twitter and Tiger Beatdown and Tumblr and in e-mail and sometimes for Salon, basically without stopping or doing literally *anything else*, like: skipping most meals and deciding hummus and chips constitute "meals," like: not taking the time off to *shower*, since this thing started.' Then she recounts a moment when the pressure got too much:

'Four *days*,' I said, 'and yesterday the trolls kicked into high gear. I mean, I could handle it when they were just calling me a whore and posting the accusers' names in the comments. I could just delete those. But now they're creating Twitter accounts, posting rape threats, and tagging them #MooreandMe so that the feed is unsafe for women or rape victims to look at. And posting the accusers' names, over and over, because one of the things we're objecting to is that posting the accusers' names is subjecting them to massive invasion of privacy, you can find their names and home addresses online, and that might get them hurt or even, like, *raped, it might get them fucking raped*, by some fucked-up dangerous Assange fans, it might *make it possible for rapists to find them and rape them* to punish them for this. ... And threatening to hack my PayPal, and threatening to hack Tiger Beatdown. And everyone saying that we believe shit we don't believe, and yelling and calling me names and calling all of us names, and I always get yelled at and called names, but this is like ... the volume is so high. Every time I look away there are twenty new comments and most of them are calling me a cunt or telling me to make them a sandwich or calling me a whore or naming the accusers or calling *all* of us whores for protesting. (Doyle, 2010b)

Here, in one passage, is evidence of both the promise and perils of digital communication; in her prose, the potential for personal experience as creative expression and a connection between self and other, and in the response from parts of the readership/audience, the potential for destructive anger and abuse.

### **The internet as a writing space**

Despite its multimedia nature, the internet is a surprisingly textual place; even images and sounds need text for users to identify and link, and in some corners the web has taken a narrative turn. One of the peculiarities of this space, for writers, is the way it mixes both

written and oral cultures by giving immediacy to a permanent text; what Walter Ong calls 'secondary orality' (Ong, 1982: 136).

Writing always faces the challenge of translating the bodily act of speech to the page; the skill lies partly in understanding that the translation cannot be literally word-for-word, and in finding ways to convey mood, tone and voice. In the digital medium, these concerns become arguably even more important, because the translation must work for a more immediate and interactive reader, and the potential for misunderstanding is greater. In their crudest form, feelings are expressed with the shortcut of the emoticon or the shock value of strong language, which is ever-present in the blogosphere, although only rarely used with literary effect.

The orality of digital communications was noted by the earliest internet commentators. The researcher John Coate, for example, wrote in 1992:

For thousands of years language has been either spoken or written. But online conversation is a new hybrid that is both talking and writing yet isn't completely either one. It's talking by writing. It's writing because you type it on a keyboard and people read it. But because of the ephemeral nature of luminescent letters on a screen, and because it has such a quick – sometimes instant – turnaround, it's more like talking. This act of conversing over computers is such a new twist that the lasting term for what it is has not yet been coined. (Coate, 1998)

And in 2001, Doc Searls, an influential web writer and consultant and co-author of *The Cluetrain Manifesto*, noted:

Blogs are somewhere between conversation and Writing (with a capital W). They're printed blurts that lithify into word balloons that float in cyberspace for the duration, making them searchable transcripts of thinking-out-loud. Few of us speak in final draft ... Most of what we know isn't highly explicit, and our expressions of it start with approximations of what we mean, or think we mean, or might eventually discover we mean – often with the help of the other person in the conversation. But when we speak, every word vanishes like snow falling on water. If we're lucky the other party reflects back a sign of understanding, or an improved expression of the same point. Whatever else happens, if the conversation is successful it proves that we

traffic in meaning, more than words. (Searls, 2001)

It took time for the possibilities created by this new, hybrid, writing space to be explored. In 1995, technology commentator Josh Quittner complained about the blinkered way mainstream publishers used the internet and urged them to adventure beyond the simple ‘repurposing’ of print text. The New Journalism defined by Tom Wolfe in 1975 had ‘smashed the conventional notion of reportage’, he wrote, but had only gone so far:

It was good to speak with a voice (as long as the writer wasn’t too much of a dork). It was important to take risks and experiment (as long as there was a tangible payoff for the reader). But Wolfe and company had a relatively small tool chest to loot. Imagine what those new journalists could have done with video and sound, with hypertext links and limitless bandwidth ... We’re not just going to change that art, but evolve it – you understand – take it to the next plane: The Way New Journalism. (Quittner)

He went on to identify the key features of this new form: a more intimate voice, hypertextuality, multimedia, and an instant, interactive audience reaction. The same qualities are noted in the work of Jay David Bolter, in his analysis of the internet as a ‘writing space’ (Bolter, 2001).

Online magazines such as *Hotwired* and *Slate* engaged with these concerns. One tactic of *Slate*, explained its editor, Michael Kinsley, was to tell stories in instalments: the reporter would ‘file dispatches, which we will post immediately, as he goes about his research. The readers will be able to follow the reporter as he gathers and analyses his material, as we have no more idea than you do about where the story will lead him or how it will come out. When he is done, if it works, the entire article will be published as an eBook.’ (Kinsley, 2001) This approach became the template for much online journalism, creating an infinite cascade of information, correction and detail.

Quittner’s comments, made with reference to websites in general, came several years before the emergence of the blog, a self-publishing interface with a reverse chronology. According to internet historian, Rudolf Ammann, the term ‘weblog’ was originally used for a collection of brief texts that shared links to external sites; the convention among early blogging artisans was that it should not be used for original content. But, in May 1999, the technology writer, Dan Gillmor, announced amid controversy that he would be extending the

format to news and 'short essays', and would accompany links with longer explanations that put them into context (Ammann, 2009). Gillmor went public a few months later, using a custom-built pre-release of Dave Winer's Manila web page software. Around the same time, Blogger.com was launched, eventually helping to popularise the personal narrative, which had already been established as a web genre (ibid.). By May 2003, giving a lecture at Harvard University, Winer was able to define the blog as the 'unedited voice of a [single] person' (Winer, 2003).

The ease that the new format brought to self-publishing, and the liminal, permanently 'unfinished' nature of much web-based writing, gave new life to older genres such as the personal or lyric essay. In 2006, the writer and commentator, Sven Birkerts, evoked the essay's inventor, Michel de Montaigne, whose *essais* or attempts to explore aspects of life were first published in 1580, as a contemporary inspiration:

The essay is poised to achieve a second life in our complex hyper-driven culture. I see it as an ideal medium of response and reflection, adjustable in scale from a few short pages to more ambitious lengths (much as the short story can span the gamut from sketchy *aperçu* to near-novella), and it is open to a full range of voices [...] Increasingly these days, it makes use of different strategies of collage and lyric juxtaposition, both of which reflect the evolution of contemporary sensibilities (Birkerts, 2006).

Andrew Sullivan, a writer and editor at the current affairs magazine *The Atlantic*, developed the argument further in his seminal essay, 'Why I Blog'. Sullivan singled out 'personality' as the form's distinctive characteristic, but distinguished between the blog and the diary. With a blog, he wrote, 'you end up writing about yourself, since you are a relatively fixed point in this constant interaction with the ideas and facts of the exterior world. And in this sense, the historic form closest to blogs is the diary. But with this difference: a diary is almost always a private matter.' (Sullivan, 2008)

Sullivan saw benefits in the form's limitations, such as the reverse chronology, which amends 'for hindsight, for the ways in which human beings order and tidy and construct the story of their lives as they look back on them.' And the apparent superficiality of the short form 'masked considerable depth' because of hyperlinks. 'A blog bobs on the surface of the ocean, but has its anchorage in waters deeper than those print media is technologically able to

exploit.’ It does not replace traditional writing but inspires it, adding ‘a new idiom’ to the act of writing (ibid.).

This appreciation has spread, confirmed by official approbation in the shape of ‘books’ and literary awards. With maturity come new doubts, however. Another *Atlantic* blogger, Marc Ambinder, launched a debate among practitioners when he announced, late in 2010, that, after five years, he was publishing his final blog post and moving back to conventional reporting. He charted the changes that had swept journalism in that time, and praised its attempts to engage with the issues thus posed. But he now felt exhausted and wanted to reflect on why this was so. One problem was that ‘the feedback loop is relentless, punishing and predicated on the assumption that the reporter’s motivation is wrong’ – a nod to the tone of sheer *fury* that often permeates the blogging readership/audience. The bigger problem, however, was that blogging was an ‘ego-intensive process’ which made the form’s demand for personality a new tyrant:

Even in straight news stories, the [blog] format always requires you to put yourself into narrative. You are expected not only to have a point of view and reveal it, but to be confident that it is the correct point of view. There is nothing wrong with this. As much as a writer can fabricate a detachment, or a ‘view from nowhere’, as Jay Rosen has put it, the writer can also fabricate a view from somewhere. You can’t really be a reporter without it. I don’t care whether people know how I feel about particular political issues; it’s no secret where I stand on gay marriage, or on the science of climate change, and I wouldn’t have it any other way. What I hope I will find refreshing about the change of formats is that I will no longer be compelled to turn every piece of prose into a personal, conclusive argument, to try and fit it into a coherent framework that belongs to a web-based personality called ‘Marc Ambinder’ that people read because it’s ‘Marc Ambinder’, rather than because it’s good or interesting. (Ambinder, 2010)

Ambinder expresses here vividly the personal experience of a professional media producer whose texts reach the public through the now-dominant channel of digital publishing. In that role, he is in constant dialogue with critics of the mainstream media, and in his farewell post, he is throwing them back a polite challenge. Although he does not use that terminology, the potential for alienation or falsity is present in the enforcement of genre conventions: the form

‘requires’ and ‘expects’. A comparison is also made which allows for falsity not just in objectivity (nowhere) but also in subjectivity (somewhere). If one is a writing practitioner, there is nothing inherently false about ‘fabricating’ – the producer *makes* a text; that is what he or she does. Nor is it inherently false to have a writing voice, distinct from one’s literal, lived self. But if the author-producer feels ‘compelled’ to do so, one could describe the result as alienation.

It is not just the ‘push’ of forced emotion that influences his decision; Ambinder also describes a palpable ‘pull’ of the pleasure that comes with the discipline of conventional reporting. The freedom to be an ‘unedited voice of a single person’ has its downsides, including the absence of judgment and impartial advice. He looks forward, for example, to the ‘opportunity for me to grow as a writer and reporter [that comes with] the heavy hand of an editor who tells you when something sucks’. He also yearns for the freedom to concentrate on the substantive *content* of the work, rather than its producer-self.

Of course ... print journalists ... have voices and identities. But they are not primarily known for their identities. They are primarily known for their work. And it’s not work that flows, predictably, down one side of the mountain. It is a type of work that justifies itself because it tells you, the audience, something you did not know about; something that is important. (ibid.)

Although not theorised in such terms, the practitioner’s thoughts, feelings and motivations described here are a reminder of the potential creativity and aesthetic richness of objectivity as a method.

### **Scenes from the blogosphere, part 2**

At the end of 2010, a trip was cancelled at the last minute due to poor weather, so I stayed in my living room and went to the land of Wikileaks. Or rather, to the intense, fast-moving, multi-layered world of news and social media punditry around a story that made ‘free information’, that central concept of the digital age, its core subject.

One part of the journey, described earlier, concerns the use of the personal blogging narrative as a way of connecting facts and feeling. Another part of the journey, described here, relates to the destructive potential of emotion in the digital space, particularly anger and paranoia.

The first example of anger concerns a personal experience, albeit a virtual one; a contribution (rare for me) to an online discussion thread and the exchange (even more rare) that resulted. A question was raised on one blog site about the potential risk to individuals arising from publication of US diplomatic cables, and the apparently dismissive stance of Wikileaks founder, Assange, towards this concern. A defence was put forward that his stance was valid because the diplomats concerned had no authority, and Wikileaks was about 'nulling and voiding their right to conduct business on your behalf'. The anonymous author of the comment, whose online traces suggest a dedicated commitment to hacking and free music downloads, began with an argument that reflects a widely supported consensus; that authority is illegitimate without consent, and consent is impossible without the transparency of an informed public (Jacolyte, 2010a). He went further, however, to say that consent was absent in this case, and the actions of authority paramount to 'rape', because 'I have never agreed to have diplomats act on my behalf ... Their self-proclaimed authority to act on your behalf is illegitimate and immoral'. The US state was also described as 'probably as sinister as it gets', compared to other sources of authority in the world that could be the legitimate target of information leaks (Jacolyte, 2010b).

At first, encouraged by the serious tone on the site, I got stuck into polite debate about political philosophy. I offered the counter-argument that since people were often in conflict, it was impossible to match the wishes of every individual. Representative democracy had evolved to help resolve those conflicts; the question was where to draw the line; how far could the delegation of authority go, and how much detail should be provided to keep the public informed? In response, my interlocutor angrily repeated his personal lack of consent and complained: 'So the best solution is to lump me in with everyone by force and threaten me with imprisonment and execution if I resist. Nice. I like it' (Jacolyte, 2010c). I was, at first, puzzled by the tinge of hysteria that could characterise diplomacy as 'rape' and representative democracy as 'lumping me in with everyone by force', but soon learned that such ideas and delivery were not unusual in this context.

The second example concerns the use of anger in the enforcement of normative values in digital culture, which show a strong bias against 'selection' of information. Private Bradley Manning had been arrested on suspicion of being the source of the Wikileaks Cablegate leak after a fellow hacker turned him in, making available transcripts of an incriminating online 'chat'. The story was put into the public domain by *Wired* magazine, which had been given a full copy of the transcripts by the hacker, an original source. In normal journalistic style,

Wired verified the transcripts and published the story with edited highlights (Zetter and Poulsen, 2010). Later, there were concerns that the transcripts might contain material that could be used to bring Assange to trial in the US, and so pressure began to build on *Wired* to release the entire text. The magazine declined, arguing that doing so would harm the privacy and interests of the soldier. This provoked strong criticism by Salon.com columnist, Glenn Greenwald, that questioned the magazine's motives, which quickly spread and amplified. One commentator, representative of a larger sample, wrote: '*Wired* needs to either release the full, unedited information or simply get used to the fact that people who censor on behalf of the government are going to get a lot of righteous, and in this case entirely correct, flack from people seeking out the truth' (see Bonner and Beschizza, 2010). The magazine eventually made a limited, additional disclosure which answered specific questions about the possible legal case against Manning, although it continued to exercise its right to use editorial judgment and refrain from publishing the full text (*ibid.*). The full text of the chat logs was released the following July, when it was judged that 'independent reporting elsewhere has tipped the scale in favor of publishing', but the magazine stood by its earlier decision saying that by weighing Manning's privacy interest against news value and relevance, it was using 'a standard journalistic balancing test embodied in the ethics guidelines of the Society of Professional Journalists' (Hansen, 2011).

By the end of the episode, the substantive demands of the magazine's critics had prompted a useful addition to public knowledge. But one could argue that this only became possible after experienced intermediaries helped to define a more specific demand that recognised the concerns of the publisher, and the angry tone and behaviour of a larger group came across as a form of punishment for a perceived transgression. In addition, discussion about the norms being defended was made more difficult by the assumption of bad faith, which removes the possibility of critical engagement.

The examples given here are anecdotal and inconclusive, and present the difficulties typical of any analysis relating to behaviour that is cumulative in effect. Computer-mediated analysis can be a useful way of overcoming this difficulty by quantifying emotional content across large quantities of text, although such research is still in its early stages. It is therefore interesting that studies using 'automatic sentiment analysis' tend to confirm the dominance of negative emotions online. One such study (Chmiel et al., 2011) found that at least 70% of posts belonged to 'quarrels', and that vitriol – typically discounted as a minority phenomenon of 'flamers' or 'trolls' – can have a disproportionate impact:

Automatic sentiment analysis shows that most posts contain negative emotions and the most active users in individual threads express predominantly negative sentiments. It follows that the average emotion of longer threads is more negative and that threads can be sustained by negative comments. ... Exchanges of angry posts between pairs of users raise the average emotional temperature of the debate and may encourage other users to adopt a similar tone, creating a generally negative emotional content in a discussion thread. (ibid.)

To some extent, the importance of negative emotions can be understood as a demand for strong feelings of any kind, not necessarily negative ones. The pressure to adopt definite views, described earlier by Ambinder, can also be seen in this light. But the sentiment analysis arguably confirms what most of us know, or soon discover, from experience in online public spaces; there is something about the setting and culture that currently privileges anger and other negative emotions, and may be helping to set it as a normative standard.

### **Digital idealisms**

At the height of the Cablegate frenzy, Silicon Valley veteran, Jaron Lanier, provided a critique of hacker culture, warning of the dangers of 'sterile information worship'. By way of illustration, he described the move to more structured, 'object-oriented' programming, to help code work more smoothly:

A great many programmers hated the object-oriented idea in the early days. It seemed like nothing but prissy restrictions [and yet] structure is what makes information usable ... Imagine openness extrapolated to an extreme. What if we come to be able to read each other's thoughts? Then there would be no thoughts. Your head has to be different from mine if you are to be a person with something to say to me. ... Privacy is not about anachronistic prohibitions on information flow, but about personhood. I was one of those young hackers who didn't get this point for a long time. I used to think that an open world would favor the honest and the true, and disfavor the schemers and the scammers. In moderation this idea has some value, but if privacy were to be vanquished, people would initially become dull, then incompetent, and then cease to exist. Hidden in the idea of radical openness is an allegiance to

machines instead of people. (Lanier, 2010)

In *You are not a gadget* (2011), Lanier lays out his ‘prohuman’ manifesto in more detail. In brief, he argues that, like all technologies, software expresses ideas about the nature of personhood, and even small changes in design can stimulate different potentials. This matters because tech culture is now dominant. One subculture of technologists has become more influential than the others, favouring a reductionist form of computationalism; the idea that all reality, including humans, is one big information system that must be open and free. Despite the rhetoric, however, this approach ends up providing more freedom for machines than for people, and fosters an ‘ideology of violation’. If we wish for an alternative, we do not have to reject technological change; we can choose another, more humanistic tradition in computer science that favours reflection and creativity. But there should be no delay, because of the lock-in effect of software engineering. In an era in which human affairs are increasingly software-driven, it is important to reject the bad ideas while we can, before they become self-fulfilling.

One privileged ideal that comes in for particular criticism is what he calls ‘drive-by anonymity’ – the most extreme transient, effortless version that divorces behaviour from consequences. This reaches its most dangerous form when the anonymity is one-sided and the target is known; for example, lynch mobs that hunted down accused adulterers in China, or the culture of ‘lulz’ – laughter at the suffering of others – that had one group targeting epileptics with flashing web designs, in the hope of inducing seizures (ibid., 61).

His point is that, while the fad for anonymity has empowered people who were perhaps already sadists, ‘the worst effect is a degradation of ordinary people’ (ibid., 15) who are drawn into nasty exchanges online, encountering our ‘inner troll’. A number of studies have indicated a growth in narcissism across society, which can contribute to such behaviours – symptoms include attention-seeking, public violence, self-promotion and a refusal to take responsibility (Twenge and Campbell, 2009). Jaron argues that the ideology of the computing cloud has encouraged this trend because it leads to user interface designs that make everyone less kind and encourages pack behaviour; sadism has gone mainstream. What is worse, he says, there is no inherent reason why this cannot scale up to an unforeseen social pathology, leading to mass outbreaks of organised violence.

Lanier, himself ‘part of a merry band of idealists’ in the pioneer 1980s, is concerned about the way that idealism has developed. His name for the ascendant tribe is ‘cybernetic

totalists' or 'digital Maoists', who profess to reject all hierarchy but tacitly maintain and reward one based on 'digital metaness' (ibid., 79). Jodi Dean, whose *Blog Theory* draws on the ideas of Slavoj Žižek and Lacanian psychoanalysis (2010), gives this idealism a different name – communicative capitalism – but in many ways they are exploring the same territory. Both are concerned about a reductionist libertarianism that favours elites; both criticise the tendency of digital idealists to dress up bad behaviour to look grand and new; and both question the enforcement of relentless optimism (Dean's 'happy solutions' trap) about networked communications. Most importantly, both are looking for a way of resisting the pressures of speed and fragmentation that work against deep thought. Dean's psychoanalytic perspective also poses additional questions about the computational theory of mind, for example, the idea that software could build models of our mental states; 'as if minds were made up, as if they were not conflicted, as if there were no unconscious' (ibid., 17).

In the internet as a writing space, where this idealism exists it comes in the form of genre conventions that celebrate the 'empowered' individual, or group of individuals, who works independently of any corporate control. From this point of view, professional editing represents the control exercised by mainstream media 'gatekeepers' who make decisions on the public's behalf, and a homogenisation of the writer's unique voice (Greenberg, 2008; 2010b). A variety of imagery has been used to evoke the difference between the two, such as 'raw' vs 'cooked' (Futrelle, 1997), with 'raw' connoting freshness, and 'cooked' connoting manipulation or spin. Another is Winer's description of blogging as 'the unedited voice of a single person', a definition he has refined and defended over many years. However, both the genre rules and their 'enforcement' remain fluid. In November 1999, for example, Winer joshes blogger Dan Gillmor that his work as a professional journalist stops him from getting 'down, dirty, and decidedly non-objective in his 'blog ... I'm not sure that that can happen while he continues to write columns elsewhere' (Winer, 1999). A couple of years later, he writes that 'writers who work for others have less integrity to offer than those who do it for love' (Winer, 2001). However, a year after that, he redefines 'integrity' as meaning 'don't lie' and 'state your interests' and says that these apply whether one is professional or not (Winer, 2002).

The perception that personal feelings are 'true' and real because they are unmediated remains a popular and persistent one, and overlaps with the popular understanding of 'authenticity' as trueness to the self. The danger posed by such a stance is that it may involve an *a priori* bias against all expertise that is problematic, and assume a state of independence

on the part of artisanal producers that ignores their wider political existence. A less commonly identified problem is that, by suggesting the more narrow conventions of 'committed' writing, digital idealism contains the seeds of an alienated subjectivity and faces the danger of going down a literary dead end.

### **Authenticity in the classroom**

In the simulated professional *practicum* of a writing class, the aim is to help students develop a sense of what is possible, and understand the choices that arise along the way. One is looking at the text not just as a final product, but as something in the state of *becoming*. However, this awareness of process goes against the grain, counter-intuitive to both the still-prevalent Romantic idealism about the immediacy of inspiration, and the digital idealism of 'the unedited voice of a single person'.

In the creative arts, people are expected to feel 'passionate' about their work. But the process of translating feelings onto the page is often misunderstood. Strong feelings as such do not make for strong stories; it is the ability of the writer to achieve *distance* from raw emotion – the sliver of ice in the heart – that leaves the reader free to find his or her own emotional response to the text.

The aspiring writer is commonly told to forget about the reader, if she or he is to be free to follow the muse. But the distance comes from being able to see the text as if one is someone else. It is consciousness of the reader in less experienced writers that helps to temper the narcissism that closes off that possibility. Even the experienced writer is thinking of the reader in indirect form, when looking for ways to 'show not tell', through imagery and other techniques. T.S. Elliot's 'objective correlative' is indeed objective, in the sense of creating an effect on the page that feels real to others. This concept can be taken for granted, forgetting that we cannot assume what is natural (Booth, 1983). It is therefore wrong to assume a binary choice between being alone and original on one hand, and connected but compromised on the other. Just as the writer learns to make a distinction between his or her self in real life, and the second self or persona on the page (Gornick, 2002), a distinction can also be made between the actual, literal reader and an imagined, implied one. By this light, the writer finds his or her own voice by imagining audiences that have gone before and then going on to alter and transform them (Hunt and Sampson, 2006).

Style is the way a writer uses language to imagine the reader and communicate meaning, based on assumptions (both tacit and explicit) about what the reader will understand and prefer. The negotiation of voice and tone is part of this process. The understanding of the early-stage writer tends to be limited to binary choices between stereotypical ‘formal’ and ‘informal’, with few modulations in-between. The aim of the writing class, in both cases, is to help people recognise the full range of voices available.

In an environment where text is in a constant state of flux, there can be a reluctance to acknowledge selection – the judgment that A is better or more important than B. The opposition to selection is usually justified on the grounds that the ‘wisdom of crowds’ is more effective and transparent than the judgment of one individual. But studies show that the ‘network effect’ tends to reflect the editing behaviour of less experienced writers, in preferring superficial ‘micro’ editing over deeper ‘macro’ changes (Jones, 2008). Experience in the classroom shows that less experienced writers tend to go to extremes in their editing by being either too hard on a text, or too soft (Greenberg, 2008; 2010b). What is missing is the middle ground of critical engagement that depends on nuanced discrimination and judgment; ‘I agree with this, but not with that’. The less experienced writer often assumes that a first draft is the best, because it is less conscious, less mediated and more raw. This authenticity is also perceived to protect it from critical engagement by others. As one student put it, ‘My character is saying everything from the heart. The poems came from my own thoughts. I feel that a person’s thoughts and opinions can’t be marked.’

The celebration of rawness, and the permanently ‘unfinished’ nature of the digital space, also translates into a bias against completion. One analysis of ‘done-ness’ in digital publishing noted the tendency to merge ‘complete’ with the concept of ‘closed’ and ‘incomplete’ with ‘open’, giving greater value to the second pair (Sewell, 2009). This appears to pose another duality that ignores the messier but more creative truth, that we need both constraint and fluidity. In textual production, the more one understands the text to be ‘finished’, the more one is able to identify what needs changing. That is why the printed page reveals more than the computer screen, and a formatted, designed text more than a random chunk of words.

### **The poetics of fact**

If the present challenge is to find an alternative to binary opposites of fact and feeling, the potential of literary journalism and other forms of creative nonfiction to anchor storytelling to

a contingent world in a way that is more persuasive and trustworthy appears to be suggestive and valuable.

Literary nonfiction tends to come to the fore in periods of uncertainty because it meets the need, on one hand, to anchor events by documenting them; and on the other, to question official representations by allowing for personal experience. It understands that the extreme privileging of 'authentic' feeling, without an external reality check, can lead to great violence being done to oneself and others, because while emotions are real, they do not exist in vacuum. Authentication is not enough; one also needs verification.

This usually involves 'immersion' reporting (Sims, 1984: 8-12), with the documentation coming from an eyewitness account of some kind, so that the writer acquires a personal experience of the story. Using the language of poetics, one can understand reporting as a way of creating one's own 'inciting incident' by putting oneself in the way of the possible facts, turning personal experience deliberately outward, to be tested by verification. The experience is then recreated for the reader on the page, using narrative prose techniques to communicate felt detail; to show what people say and do, and not just tell the reader about it in 'summary' mode. It contains and communicates the intensity of the method. As the Polish writer, Wojciech Tochman, puts it, concerning a book of reportage: 'I am not able to write about something just using secondary sources. My book is an experience. I must have personal contact with the protagonists. I have to *touch* people' (2011, personal communication).

In one example of the form, a reporter from *Rolling Stone* magazine spent a month with a US army general and his staff (Hastings, 2010). The resulting revelations, which resulted in the general's dismissal and changes to government policy, were all the more powerful for being portrayed through scenes in which the actors speak in their own voice. The real-world impact of that report is also a reminder that while from a technical point of view all stories hinge on the consequences of actions, in a true story those consequences are real. It acts as a counterweight to those who argue that if a writer uses craft to create a particular effect in the reader, the text loses a distinctive relationship to the real. Art recognises the creativity that lies in shutting down possibilities, and working within constraints. The chief constraint of nonfiction writing is that the process of discovery is documented in a verifiable way. The distinction with other, fictional genres lies not in the choice of narrative techniques, which belong to all forms of prose, but in the pact being made with the reader; the promise that one is not intending to deceive.

The demand for documentation is sometimes portrayed as a meaningless box-ticking exercise. But the extra dimension that the constraints bring to a story suggests that objectivity as a method is not just about alienating ‘rules’ but about the creative force of imagination; the desire to discover and know things outside of oneself, the imaginative sympathy to see things from another being’s point of view, and the openness required for ‘what critic Mikhail Bakhtin described as the “novel” of the “inconclusive present” that resists coming to critical... closure.’ (Hartsock, 2011: 38).

In this sense, literary nonfiction lends itself to what the intellectual historian Richard Kearney calls a ‘poetics of the possible’. This involves a rejection of parody and pastiche, which runs the danger of ‘abandoning the emancipatory practice of imagining alternative horizons of existence’ (2005: 30-31) and the idea that every text is of equal importance, which precludes the possibility of ethical judgement or critical discernment (2005: 280). The imagery used by the poet, Robert Sheppard, is also suggestive. He writes about ‘a speculative, writerly discourse’ of self-organising which allows the working out of difficult ideas about how something is to be made (2008: 4). For Sheppard, poetics is a framework that has built into it an awareness of ‘the potential mobility of text’ (2008: 8) and what hasn’t yet been written; it is not a model, manifesto, explanation, description or interpretation. It allows us to consider ‘construction’ in a non-totalising manner, without telling us what to think or feel.

This is suggestive of what I call a ‘poetics of fact’, in which imagination is understood not to be about invention as such, but about the creator acting as a shaping consciousness; noticing things, imagining new possibilities about the ways in which they might be connected, and then communicating that to others. It also suggests a rejection of ‘committed’ speech, in which a response is prescribed by an unambiguous ideology. In this context, facts can be considered the ‘show’ of nonfiction prose writing, and opinion the ‘tell’.

## **Conclusion**

If emotion continues to be seen as the simple enemy of reason, then reductive efforts to ‘fix’ problems and manage people are likely to continue, and the fury people feel at being told what to think and feel may grow into a defiant irrationality; at the very least, a manipulative instrumentalism of its own.

The question has been posed, whether the potential exists for an alienated subjectivity in artisan as well as professional texts, and if so, what alternative criteria might help to

distinguish between a text's falseness or authenticity. There has also been an exploration of strategies that have arisen in response to a crisis of trust, and their potential to put meaning more within our reach. It is hoped that the material explored here identifies the promise that exists in approaches to objectivity that offer ways to connect fact and feeling, through forms of personal experience that contain an ethical awareness of others.

One of the possible strategies concerns a renewal of the essay form within the internet as a writing space, to allow for an open-ended expression of subjectivity, and exploration of what is possible, not just the certainties of good versus bad. But a tension has been identified between the uncertainties of the essay and the expectation, expressed both explicitly and tacitly, that digital personal narratives should use strong, committed forms of expression. Given the growing dominance of digital communication, it therefore seems important to acknowledge the potential for manipulation that lies in 'committed' speech of any form, whether it occurs in traditional, professional media or in alternative, artisan forms and to question the demand for emphatic, personal opinion as proof of authenticity.

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