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It is with great pleasure that we welcome you to the first Special Edition of PLATFORM: Journal of Media and Communication. This edition begins what we hope to be a long-standing collaboration with the Australian and New Zealand Communications Association (ANZCA), and it provides a fantastic opportunity to highlight some of the best work from graduate scholars in media and communication. ANZCA is a professional association for researchers and professionals working in the broad field of media and communications. This ANZCA Special Edition showcases some fascinating findings and discussions around media theory and also engages with specific elements of communications practice.

There is a silent current in Australia that is slowly gathering momentum, but needs support to gather force. It is the ever-growing tide of post-graduate students beginning research in media and communications disciplines. However, in a sea of more than 48,000 postgraduate research students in Australia, it can be difficult to find a supportive network of peers in a particular discipline. One of PLATFORM’s key aims is to provide a space where graduate students can ask questions, initiate debates, and interact with some of the key concepts of media and communications theory. Similarly, ANZCA has recognised that completing post-graduate research can be a daunting, and quite solitary, experience. The organisation sought to provide an opportunity for students to talk, not just about their research, but also about their experiences as a postgraduate in a forum of their peers and mentors.

With generous financial support from the ARC-funded Cultural Research Network and the ANZCA executive, five post-graduate workshops were held across Queensland, Victoria and New South Wales. The most extensive workshop was held at Queensland University of Technology in July 2009 as a pre-conference ANZCA event. Selected post-graduates were given an opportunity to present their research to eminent media and communications scholars, including Professor Gerard Goggin, Professor John Hartley and Professor Gay Hawkins, amongst others. The workshop was very successful, provoking lively debate and invaluable support to postgraduates at various stages of their candidature. There was an overwhelming response from students who wanted information about successfully completing their candidature, and a supportive and encouraging environment to talk about their research. The only complaint was that there wasn’t another workshop planned with more time for conversation! What this points to is a lively post-graduate community, filled with enthusiastic scholars creating innovative approaches to media and communications research.
From the plethora of talented individuals who presented at the workshops, we are thrilled to present five of the students’ research in this very special edition. These five postgraduates were chosen by their peers to reflect the variety of interesting research currently occurring within the media and communications field. Among the contributors, Deb Wall explores issues of indigenous access and opportunity in her case study of the Western Australian government’s consultations with indigenous communities regarding the Liquefied Natural Gas (LNG) Development at James Price Point in the Kimberley. Wall argues that the ways in which indigenous communities are represented in governmental consultation takes on complexity because their own communications and governance systems must be articulated in the process of consultation.

Susan Bandias explores indigenous access and opportunity from a different perspective: uses of information communication technology. Bandias’s case study examines the role of information communication technology in creating social inclusion and access for indigenous communities in the Northern Territory. The case study illustrates Bandias’ argument that the gaps between technology, social capital and indigenous community and social needs have not been well researched and makes an innovative contribution to the debate about how information communication technologies might create social capital divisions. Orit Ben-Harush’s article continues on the theme on the effect of information communications technology on social capital, but makes a fascinating discovery. Her case study of contemporary networks of adult females in an Australian sea change community found that the mobile phone was the least used method of communication amongst friends. Ben-Harush’s case study illustrates that current Australian mobile phone policy does not actually meet the social and communication needs of women in regional areas.

The last two contributions make quite varied but topical contributions to media and communications theories, illustrating the innovative research postgraduate students are conducting into traditional thinking in the discipline. Geoffrey Berry’s research is a unique take on traditional media theory. His article compares influential critiques of mass media from such varied theorist as McLuhan, to Adorno to Baudrillard and compares the mythic element situated within each theorisation. Taking a modern reading of Plato as his guide, Berry argues that communications systems falsely maintain a paradigm of truth or reality. Emma Tom takes on the world of cheerleading, suggesting the form occupies a vastly provocative cultural status, provoking popular derision, feminist anxiety and sexualised interest. Unfortunately this division, Tom argues, leaves the young women associated with cheerleading without allies in the cultural debate.

These papers demonstrate the vibrant and exciting future of media and communications research in Australia. More importantly, they demonstrate the need and importance of a community to support and foster these innovative contributions to the field. ANZCA provides this support through its community of scholars and culture of research activity, whilst PLATFORM provides support by giving graduate students the chance to contribute their voice to a global discussion on media and communications. We hope that this edition illustrates the important role of graduate research in the media field. We would encourage all post-graduates to seek membership and to present at the annual ANZCA conferences, attend one of the many post-graduate workshops, and to make your voice heard by contributing to PLATFORM in the future.
- Editorial -

Guest Editor Diana Bossio would like to acknowledge the assistance of the current ANZCA post-graduate representative, Lucy Morieson, who made mammoth tasks more manageable - and a lot more fun! She would also like to thank Gerard Goggin, Terry Flew and John Tebutt for their assistance, and the ANZCA executive for their unwavering support of post-graduate endeavour.

Furthermore, this edition would not have been possible without the wonderful work of our copy editors Marie Christodulaki and Dale Leorke, our peer reviewers and the support of the entire PLATFORM editorial team.
COMMUNICATION PATTERNS WITHIN SOCIAL NETWORKS: A CASE STUDY OF AUSTRALIAN WOMEN

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Abstract: Based on the perception that “individual bonds to one another is the essence of society” (Fischer, 1982a, p. 2), this paper examines contemporary networks of friends: friendworks, of adult women in an Australian sea change community. Communication patterns are examined drawing on findings from a case study of 26 women aged 35-76 years. Among the case study participants, many have undertaken a ‘sea change’ as adults, which in most cases has led to a significant reconstruction of their friendworks. Location and lifestyle are identified as impacting factors on communication patterns with friends; face-to-face interactions are by far the most frequent and preferred method of communication among the participants. The landline telephone and internet are the main communication methods used to maintain friendships with distant loved ones, while the mobile phone is reported as the communication method employed the least. The infrequency of mobile phone use can be attributed to cost issues, highlighting a discrepancy between these women’s social and communication needs and the current Australian mobile phone policy.

INTRODUCTION

This paper examines how women in an Australian sea change community make new friends on relocation, how they maintain old friendships, and how they perceive these social relations by investigating communication methods used when interacting with friends. Three main themes are highlighted: friendships, communication methods, and life in sea change communities; friendships are explored as a particular subgroup within the women’s social networks and are referred to as friendworks1 (Ben-Harush, 2009). The explored Communication methods used within friendworks include: face-to-face, landline telephone, internet and mobile phone. Finally, sea change communities; the Australian term for settlements along the coast and an increasing population mobility trend, are set as the context of the study. It is proposed that life in sea change communities influence communication use patterns.

This paper is based on findings from a case study executed in one Australian sea change

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town. Twenty-six local women aged 35-76 were approached and interviewed about their relocation and social integration process; how they made new friends, how they communicate with local friends and how they keep in touch with distant loved ones. In order to address these concerns, friendworks and population mobility aspects are firstly addressed.

**ZOOMING IN: FROM SOCIAL NETWORKS TO FRIENDWORKS**

“Individual bonds to one another is the essence of society” (Fischer, 1982a, p. 2), and consequently they are of interest to many social studies, in addition to this case study. The individuals’ bonds which provide possible benefits are most commonly referred to as social networks (Litwin, 1996):

> Individual’s relatives, friends and associates, the set of people with whom an individual is directly involved... [People] whom we know and whom we can depend on. [A social network] influences our success in life, our security and sense of well-being, and even our health. (Fischer, 1982a, p. 2-3)

The importance and significance of social networks have been long acknowledged in previous studies as fundamental to social integration and emotional well-being (Agneessens, Waeghe & Lievens, 2006). They also have a direct impact on individuals’ physical and mental health (Thoits, 1982; Cohen & Hoberman, 1983; Thoits, 1983; House, Umberson & Landis, 1988; Lin & Ensel, 1989; Umberson, Chen, House, Hopkins & Slaten, 1996; Pyszczynski, Greenberg & Solomon, 1997; Agneessens et al., 2006). Additionally, social networks are important because of their structure; the relations within the network motivate flows of support, information and companionship, enhancing efficiency of actions (Putnam, 1995; Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998). These studies and others show that social networks generate social capital (Coleman, 1988; Putnam, 1995; Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998; Woolcock, 1998; Narayan, 1999; Bourdieu, 2006).

Though social network is a dominant and a key social term, it is ambiguous. On the one hand, it is very straightforward – the sum of the people one knows, “a social network consists of a finite set … of actors and the relation … defined on them” (Wasserman & Faust, 1994, p. 20). On the other hand, in-depth observation of the term reveals confusion, vagueness and wide generalisation in analysing whether specific people are included or excluded from one’s social network.

Moreover, when examining domestic communication patterns, which are the focus of the described case study, family and friends are found to be the majority of contacts people interact with daily over the landline telephone (Moyal, 1992; Rakow, 1992), via the internet (Wellman, Boase & Chen, 2002), or while using mobile phones (The mobile life report 2006: How mobile phones change the way we live, 2006; Wajcman, Bittman, Johnstone, Brown & Jones, 2008). Therefore, this case study strategically targeted only one subgroup within social networks: network of friends, or in other words, friendworks (Ben-Harush, 2009). Though this term was originally coined by the author in early stages of this particular case study, it might apply to alternative areas of research in communication, psychology, economy, politics and cultural studies. A friendwork is a set of people an individual maintains a friendship with. A friendwork is one specific type (a subgroup) of social network. Other subgroups of social networks include family, work related relationships, location based ties and online-acquaintances (Ben-Harush, 2009). Participation within different subgroups of social networks intercepts and overlaps. A friendwork incorporates overlapping friendship circles from work, childhood, church, politics, and shared recreation. Even within a friendwork, a variety of social ties can be found: intimate friends, those to socialise with, others to share a particular interest, or recent casual friends. A friendwork is open to friends leaving and new ones entering.
A key term within friendworks is friend. When asked about their friends, participants were encouraged to use their own interpretations of this term. Any person they considered a friend was named, included within their friendwork and discussed regarding mutual communication patterns.

Friendworks are the focal point of the case study. Communication methods are the means through which friendworks are mediated, maintained and reflected. Both friendworks and communication methods used in friendworks are contextualised by the specific location of the case study: an Australian sea change community. It is proposed here that the specific location influences friendworks as well as communication patterns in a distinctive manner. Therefore, the next section provides further detail on sea change communities as an example of population mobility, while focusing specifically on Ocean Shores, the town in which the case study took place.

Ocean Shores: A Population Mobility Pattern in an Australian Sea Change Community

Population mobility is a dominant aspect of the modern world which significantly influences nations as well as individuals (Larsen, Axhausen & Urry, 2006; Larsen, Urry & Axhausen, 2006; Sheller & Urry, 2006; Urry, 2007). Based on the recent Australian census, 43 per cent of the Australian population changed their place of residence between 2001 to 2006 (Pink, 2006, p. 4). With population growth in Australian capital cities (Pink, 2006), counterurbanisation, the movement of people outside metropolitan areas to rural places, has also been identified in the recent decades. Specifically, relocation to rural settlements along the coast has been recently branded as a ‘sea change’ (Murphy, 2002; Hamilton & Mail, 2003; Burnley & Murphy, 2004). Today, over 20 per cent of the Australian population resides in sea change centres and communities (Stokes, 2004). The growth in these coastal areas is consistently higher than the national average (Trewin, 2004). Moreover, the number of people shifting to the coast is expected to increase, at least over the next ten years (Salt, 2003).

These figures highlight the significant impact of population mobility on sea change communities taking in newcomers in great numbers. The Australian government identified this coastal growth as a national phenomenon, establishing in 2004 the Sea Change Taskforce, a national body which addresses the impact of the sea change phenomenon and provides support and guidance to coastal councils attempting to manage the impact of rapid growth.

Of all of New South Wales coastal regions, the Richmond-Tweed region (where the case study was conducted) has the fastest recent growth rate (ABS, 2009). This population increase is consistent throughout the last twenty years (Salt, 2003). According to the 2001 Census (ABS, 2001), the three shires (Tweed, Byron and Ballina) have recorded some of the highest average
annual growth in New South Wales coastal regions.

Behind these high growth figures are many Australians moving from one place to another. Therefore, population mobility is a dominant theme within the case study. It is also a major interest for local, state and federal stakeholders. While implications of population mobility and high growth rates in sea change communities are apparent in infrastructure, employment, education and health, as a social matter, it receives much less attention. To fill this gap and to highlight the importance and the impact of such social issues, this study focuses on this theme when examining friendworks as a social infrastructure contextualised by population mobility in the sea change town of Ocean Shores.

Ocean Shores is a small town of approximately 5,600 residents (ABS, 2007), located on the Far North Coast of New South Wales. Brisbane is approximately 150 kilometres north and Sydney approximately 850 kilometres to the south (see Figure 1). Ocean Shores is about 20 square kilometres in size. It features a long ocean beach on its eastern perimeter and is surrounded by flora and fauna reserves (see Figure 2). Ocean Shores is a part of the Byron Shire local government area, which almost tripled its population in 30 years, from 11,000 residents in 1976 to almost 29,000 in 2006.

![Figure 2: Ocean Shores’ view from the local lookout](image)

Ocean Shores was established in the late 1960s as a resort and recreation residential development intended to attract mainly retirees. Since the 1980s it has experienced a continuous growth in population across all ages. Ocean Shores is still a favoured location for the elderly, however, today it also attracts families and a younger population (with the exception of a decrease in the number of young adults aged 15 to 24, who leave Ocean Shores for the ‘big’ cities seeking employment). Families are moving to Ocean Shores as parents find it an attractive place to raise children while being able to enjoy the beach, the sun and the quiet lifestyle in an environment that embraces alternative cultures and the unique ambience of the ‘Rainbow Region’ (Kitas, 2003).

However, breadwinning is quite a challenge in a rural town originally designed for retirees. Consequently, high numbers of adults are part-time employees (40 per cent compared to 28 per cent nationwide) and unemployed (9.5 per cent compared to 5.2 per cent nationwide). In 2006, the median weekly household income was $756, 27 per cent lower than the nationwide figure ($1027). However, median weekly rent is $250, 30 per cent higher than the national figure, suggesting a relatively high demand for houses in Ocean Shores, and implying that it is a desirable place to call home. Labour force occupations comprise self-employed professionals, technicians and trade workers, labourers and sales workers. The local lifestyle is generally considered modest reflecting non-materialistic lifestyle values (Kitas, 2003).

In 2006, most Ocean Shores residents were Australian citizens (88.2 per cent) and were born in Australia (78 per cent), though the number of people born overseas is increasing.
(from 14 per cent in 2001 to 16 per cent in 2006). This is in line with the national policy which encourages immigration. However, Ocean Shores is populated with more people who were born in Australia (78 per cent in 2006) than those reported in the nation-wide data (71 per cent in 2006). This signifies that Ocean Shores is mostly an internal migration destination, and is less attractive to immigrants who in most cases choose to live in metropolitan areas (Stimson & Minnery, 1998).

THE CASE STUDY METHODOLOGY

Ocean Shores was chosen for this case study as an example of the sea change nation-wide demographic phenomenon. Including participants from the town aimed at capturing local social relationships as well as examining the influence of distance on friendworks. As the researcher lives in Ocean Shores, a deeper understanding of this particular location and the social relations within it, contributed to executing the research as well as analysing the findings.

The research design included a case study of 26 women aged 35-76 residing in Ocean Shores. Six main topics have been examined: the move to Ocean Shores, the process of making new friends, the current friendwork composition, communication patterns within friendworks, mobile phone use and the impact of mobile phones. A combination of quantitative and qualitative methods were used to address these topics, including online surveys, in-depth, semi-structured interviews, friendwork tables, mobile phone logs and diagrams of friend networks. Interviews that lasted on average an hour and a half were conducted in participants’ homes between December 2008 and January 2009, and were recorded digitally and later transcribed. The interview transcripts were coded thematically using NVivo qualitative research software.

The decision to focus on four communication methods, rather than one, draws on previous communication studies emphasising that when people communicate with others within their social network, multiple methods of communication are usually employed (Chen, Boase & Wellman, 2002; Wellman et al., 2002; Tacchi, Slater & Hearn, 2003; Baym, Zhang & Lin, 2004; Boase, Horrigan, Wellman & Rainie, 2006; Foth & Hearn, 2007; Geser, 2007; Hearn & Foth, 2007). Different situations engage different communication methods. This approach derives from the communication ecology theory, where communication is understood “as processes that involve a mix of media, organised in specific ways, through which people connect with their social networks” (Tacchi et al., 2003, p. 17). The case study refers to some, but not all, communication technologies in use. Four of the main interactive communication methods are explored in this study: face-to-face, landline telephone, internet and mobile phone.

Drawing on two seminal telephone use studies (Moyal, 1989; Rakow, 1992), only adult female participants were recruited through a process of ‘snowball sampling’. The researcher (aged 39 years) has been included within the case study sample. The focus on participants aged 35 to 76 derives from the actual underrepresentation of this segment of population within recent Australian mobile phone studies which either focus on the overall population (Mackay & Weidlich, 2007, 2008; Wajcman et al., 2008; Mackay & Weidlich, 2009) or on much younger age groups (Media and communications in Australian families 2007, ; Donald & Spry, 2007). This study addressed this literature gap.

RELOCATING, BEFRIENDING AND SPATIAL PROXIMITY

Two notions of place primarily affected participants’ friendworks; firstly, the actual move to a new dwelling place which redefined spatial proximity to (or distance from) existing and new friends and secondly, the local ambience of a sea change community which motivated increasing face-to-face interactions with local new friends.
Most case study participants named a number of dwelling places before they arrived at Ocean Shores. No interviewee was locally born. Few lived in the Byron shire before moving to Ocean Shores, but kept changing their dwelling place every few years. For most women, the move to Ocean Shores will not be their last relocation. Overall, participants reported living in Ocean Shores for less than one year to a maximum of 20 years, providing wide perspectives on local life as newcomers as well as veteran residents. In accordance with national statistics regarding population mobility (Pink, 2006, p. 4), 42 per cent of the case study participants (total of 26 women) moved to Ocean Shores less than five years ago and were regarded as newcomers, while roughly the other half are considered locals. The case study participants came to Ocean Shores from various locations, however, most participants moved from larger distant population centres.

Women who move to a sea change community as adults establish their friendwork based on previous dwelling locations. When settling in the new dwelling place, adult women reform their friendwork to include new local friends, while excluding existing weak distance ties. The Ocean Shores case study participants who lived in Ocean Shores for over four years reported that most of their friends live up to a one hour drive away and vice versa; while most newcomers’ friends still reside in their previous dwelling location. Friendworks are constantly under reconstruction and manipulated by time and place.

Fischer (1982a), in a seminal study on friendships in the US, mentions that people’s dwelling place plays a key role in shaping their natural relations to one another (1982a, p. 1). He also emphasises the influence of spatial proximity on friendships (1982b). Both statements are evident in the case study interviews. Participants regard life in a small town along the Australian coastline as fairly relaxed and intertwined with frequent face-to-face encounters within a small familiar community. The spatial proximity aspect of life in a small community increases frequency of face-to-face encounters (Mok, Wellman & Basu, 2007), which consequently reinforces these relations.

Bearing in mind that this particular dwelling location implies spatial proximity and a relaxed lifestyle, the case study explored how women communicate with their friends face-to-face or via mediated communication of landline telephone, internet and mobile phone. The findings are discussed in the next section.

**Communicating Friendships**

Participants were asked about their communication patterns with friends; used and preferred methods of communication with friends, as well as communication frequency, in order to better understand social relations within friendworks.

The most common method participants reported using when communicating with local friends is face-to-face (67 per cent). The second common method is the internet (15 per cent), primarily email communication. The third communication method is the landline telephone (13 per cent), while the least common method is the mobile phone (5 per cent), as presented in Figure 2. The high percentage of face-to-face interactions is partially explained by spatial proximity; participants experience frequent face-to-face interactions mainly in local public spaces such as the supermarket, schools, sports centres and on the beach, but also regularly dropping past friends’ dwellings. However, even when examining participants’ overall friendworks, i.e. their global friendwork regardless of the friends’ dwelling location, communication methods are still ranked in the same order, though in different ratios (face-to-face 40 per cent, internet 26 per cent, landline telephone 22 per cent, mobile phone 10 per cent). When analysing the communication method mostly dominant per user (total number of friends communicated in
each method, by each participant), 14 of 25 participants marked face-to-face (56 per cent) as the mostly used communication method, five participants the internet (20 per cent) and the final five respondents (20 per cent) indicated mostly using the landline telephone. Mobile phone was reported as the most common method by one participant (4 per cent).

Moreover, when participants were asked in general, which of the communication methods they most commonly use (see ‘participants response regarding the dominant communication method’ in Figure 2), 47 per cent reported face-to-face, 26 per cent internet, 21 per cent landline telephone and 5 per cent (one respondent) mobile phone. When asked for the favourite communication method with friends, regardless of practical limitations (such as distance, time differences and cost), the results were even more extreme, again in the same ranking order; 77 per cent of the participants chose face-to-face, 19 per cent favoured landline telephone and 4 per cent (1 person) preferred the internet. No participant nominated the mobile phone as the most favoured communication method. Figure 3 presents used and preferred communication methods as detailed above.

![Figure 3: A comparison of mostly used and favoured communication method with friends](image)

Based on these case study findings, face-to-face is the most preferred and practiced communication method within local and global friendworks. Preference of face-to-face encounters over alternative communication methods has been reported in previous studies (Reid, 1977; Wellman & Tindall, 1993; Bordia, 1997; Baym et al., 2004; Mok et al., 2007; Dare, 2009). Some of the reasons for this preference are detailed shortly. Face-to-face interactions are particularly used within local friendworks implying that spatial proximity motivates physical encounters. However, even within global friendworks, face-to-face interactions are mostly practiced, though due to distance restrictions greater use of mediated communication methods is evident, particularly internet and the landline telephone.
Contrary to the first questions which focused on the most common communication method used when interacting with friends, the latter question focuses on the participants’ conceptual preferences (“What is your favourite way of communicating with friends?”) regardless of their de facto behaviour. In this case, preference for face-to-face is even higher, indicating it is the most desired method. However, another interesting finding is favouring landline telephone calls over the internet, despite the most-commonly-used-method findings indicating that the internet is more popular than the landline telephone when communicating with friends. This indicates that theoretically people prefer using the landline telephone over the internet, though in practice the opposite is done. Internet use with friends has been found more common than landline telephone calls. The different charging policy of internet (generally a fixed monthly payment) and the landline telephone (generally a monthly post-paid payment) might be an influencing factor manipulating use patterns, though this needs to be examined in greater detail to better understand the underlying motivations. Lastly, the low mobile phone use reported when communicating with friends, as well as the fact that no one chose this method as the most favoured within the case study friendworks, suggests that other communication methods better address participants’ needs. Therefore when compared with other methods, the mobile phone is clearly deficient.

The dominance of face-to-face interactions is also apparent when analysing the frequency of communication with friends by communication methods. The case study participants communicate with a higher number of friends face-to-face than via telecommunications when interaction is frequent (everyday 58 per cent, a few times a week 46 per cent, and once a week 56 per cent), implying that most face-to-face communication is executed with spatially proximate friends. In cases of less frequent interaction (a few times a month or less), participants primarily use the internet and the landline telephone (over two thirds of the participants when communication frequency is less than once a week). These results are presented in Figure 4. Again, the least used communication method across all frequency interactions is the mobile phone.

![Figure 4: Communication method and frequency of use of case study participants](image)
According to the ABS social survey (Pink, 2007), 96 per cent of informants reported having contact in the previous week (in person, via telephone, mobile, mail or e-mail) with family or friends not occupying the same household. Of those, 79 per cent had contact in person while an even greater proportion (93 per cent) had weekly contact via telecommunications including landline telephone, mail or e-mail. Both studies show that most people frequently meet close people (friends and family) in person, while simultaneously interact via mediated communication methods.

Figure 2 identifies the internet as the second preferred and practiced communication method by participants, while the landline telephone was consistently reported as slightly less dominant. These findings differ from data collected throughout the ABS social survey (Pink, 2007) which found that landline telephone is the most popular mediated communication method used when interacting with family and friends among people aged over 35 years (comparing similar age groups to the case study’s, on average, 93 per cent of 35-74 years reported using the landline telephone to communicate with family and friends, with no significant gender difference found). This tendency increases with age; a higher percentage of older people reported using the landline telephone to communicate with family and friends than younger respondents, as presented in Figure 5. The internet (41 per cent) was reported to be used by fewer people than those reported using mobile phone voice calls (68 per cent) for the same purpose, but slightly more than using SMS (38 per cent).

According to the case study findings, the mobile phone was found to be the least used and least favoured communication method with friends. This also varies from the ABS survey results (Pink, 2007), where mobile phones, mainly voice calls, are found to be used by more people than the internet to communicate with family and friends across all ages.

The dissimilarities between the two studies primarily result from different inquiries. The ABS survey asks about any mediated communication method (excluding face-to-face) used (respondents could mark multiple answers) in the last three months, while the case study specifically focuses on the most dominant or favoured way of communication (only one method in each category) regardless of time limit. Therefore, the two studies examine...
different communication aspects and generally should not be compared. However, the ABS survey emphasises the popularity of the landline telephone when communicating with family and friends (almost all respondents use this method, especially those over 35 years). The high mobile phone rates could be explained by the fact that the ABS survey targeted family members as well as friends, while the case study addressed friends only. However, more than anything, the ABS survey emphasises that the case study findings do not fall within the national average. One way to explain this is by associating unique social characters to adult women in sea change communities that differentiate their friendworks and the way they communicate with friends compared with the communication between family and friends at a national level. These issues are examined later. Firstly, the reasons participants prefer one communication method over the other needs to be highlighted.

Gratifications of Communication Methods

The uses and gratification theory (Blumler & Katz, 1974) examines communication methods in light of the social and psychological needs of individuals. Though this theory was originally developed to explain the uses of mass communications, its principles are relevant in this study of communication methods. According to the uses and gratification theory, media users play an active role in choosing and using communication methods. Users take an active part in the communication process and are goal oriented in their use. They look for a communication method that best fulfils their need. Usually, there are alternate choices to satisfy users’ needs. Drawing on this communication theory, this section presents gratifications participants reported while using different communication methods and choosing one method over the other.

Preference to face-to-face interaction over the other communication methods can be explained by increased feelings of enjoyment and closeness, richer conversations (“you can talk about a lot more things”), physical closeness (“you can give them a hug”) and emotionally stronger experiences. Dorothy (66) attests to this by saying she feels a “much greater sense of closeness. You can reach out and touch them. You can laugh together. You can see their facial expressions”. Ella (36) commented that “face-to-face is much more personal. It allows better communication - a variety of expressions of feelings, or more conversation topics. Usually mmm... it takes longer”.

Those preferring face-to-face but admitting that in practice they use the landline telephone more explain this by saying “it’s easier to make a phone call rather than get in the car and go and see them. I keep in touch over the phone” (Beverly, 76). Most women state practical reasons, “it is the cheapest and it is available”, “it does not require pre-coordination”, and “it is simply more convenient”, to clarify their preference of landline telephone over face-to-face interactions. When comparing face-to-face, landline telephone and the internet, Dorothy (66) explains:

The telephone is somewhere in between. It’s more like a conversation, because I am not as deliberate and thoughtful as I am [when] doing email. But at the same time, you are not seeing the person face-to-face. That’s why skype [Voice over IP application] is such a good thing because it’s almost like being on the telephone, but you can see them. More like face-to-face.

Voice over IP applications enable communication based on converged visual, audio and textual information and therefore offer an interactive experience closer to face-to-face meetings. However, in practice, only few participants reported using such applications. All are overseas-born with extensive friendworks abroad, suggesting again that cost is the main motivation for using VoIP over landline telephone calls which are significantly dearer.
Suzanne (45) emphasised another advantage of the telephone, “it’s often good to be talking on the phone cause sometimes you can say things you don’t necessarily say face-to-face”. Caroline (37) noted that “most of the time I don’t have time to be with friends face-to-face”. Holly (42) emphasises the popularity of the landline telephone, “it’s part of life for local and distant contact”, while Joanne (67) reinforced this notion when relating to landline telephone use as a habit and “you tend to stick to habits”.

Preference for internet communication is mainly associated with practical considerations. Participants found the internet convenient (“I don’t like to call people late. You can send emails at any time”, and in another: “we are both busy and you can read emails later”), cost effective (“I like emails cause it’s free”), and suitable for global communication (“with the American friends, because of time difference, email is ideal”). Additionally, some participants reported that emails allow them to better express themselves:

When you are emailing, you have the time to compose your thoughts, which I certainly do. Most of my emails are fairly well thought out. I think: what would they like to hear about? What interesting anecdotes could I tell them? I try to think of composing a message that will actually amuse and inform them, which I don’t think when I am talking face-to-face. Face-to-face we just chatter. Email for me is more reflective and thoughtful and deliberate (Dorothy, 66).

For Dorothy, such qualities made the internet a very comfortable medium to use: “email is so much a part of my life that I feel much better about sending an email”. Aligned with this attitude, she describes her approach to the landline telephone:

When the telephone rings, someone at the other end feels compelled to answer it. We are like Pavlovian conditioning. We could ignore it, but most of the time we don’t. So, although the telephone used to be a major communication for me before the internet, it’s less and less, because of that convenience factor… I am always concerned that I will interrupt someone else. I don’t think that the telephone is as agreeable communication form as it used to be. I much prefer either face-to-face or email.

Dorothy is very decisive and keen in using email and internet in general over the landline telephone. This is interesting since Dorothy is a retiree, and the national findings show that the older the people the more they use the landline telephone (Pink, 2007). It is proposed here, that again, cost plays a key role in motivating users to embrace more cost-effective technologies that better suit their needs, regardless age or gender, specifically in financially restricted scenarios. However, this needs further investigation.

Though internet is the second most popular communication method with friends, when focusing on communication methods with distant friends for emotional support rather than instrumental aid, face-to-face interactions are preferred over landline telephone conversations, proceeded by internet use. Though some respondents use email for emotional communication (usually reporting a certain condition or asking for advise), “it feels more remote because the person is not right there” (Dorothy, 66). However, as in previous telephone studies (Moyal, 1992; Rakow, 1992), the case study participants considered the landline telephone as the closest substitute to face-to-face meetings, especially because it enables simultaneous feedback like face-to-face interactions, and it is more commonly used than voice over IP applications.

The case study participants showed a clear preference of face-to-face interactions over mediated communication methods. Prioritisation of the mediated communication methods: internet, landline telephone and mobile phone, suggests that telecommunication succeeds in
connecting people but is not as favoured or desired as face-to-face interactions. In most cases, people use telecommunication only when face-to-face interaction is impossible. In sea change communities, face-to-face interactions are still quite common, hence alternative communication methods are used less. That is, most participants’ social needs are fulfilled by face-to-face encounters.

**MOBILE PHONES AND THE USES AND GRATIFICATIONS THEORY**

The case study participants ranked the mobile phone as the least used and least favoured communication method with friends, and their general mobile phone use was found to be much more basic and minimal than reported in recent Australian mobile phone use studies (Wajcman et al., 2008; Mackay & Weidlich, 2009). This pattern repeated with most case study participants, indicating that they share similar motivations and gratifications for mobile phone use as influenced by a wider context of moving to and living in a sea change community.

In general, when moving, friendworks are reformed to include new local friends and to exclude distant weak ties. Accordingly, communication patterns with friends change as well. Such a turnover in communication patterns with friends is evident in mobile phone use. Domestic mobile communication is mostly executed between local family and friends (Sørensen, 2006; Mackay & Weidlich, 2007; Wajcman, Bittman, Jones, Johnstone & Brown, 2007). When people move to a new place, they do not have many local friends, hence their mobile phone use capacity significantly decreases.

Moreover, a decrease in mobile phone use is evident when analysing mobile phone use based on the uses and gratifications theory. Leung & Wei (2000) define seven types of gratification: mobility, immediate access, instrumentality, affection and sociability, reassurance, fashion and status, and relaxation. The case study findings indicate that the most relevant gratification for adult women residing in a sea change town is instrumentality. A relaxed lifestyle diminishes the need to use mobile phones for affection-and-sociability, immediate access, reassurance, fashion and status, or relaxation.

The case study participants reported deliberately restricting their mobile phone use to instrumental purposes: micro-coordination (Ling, 2004), mainly due to cost issues. Yet, even use of the mobile phone for micro-coordination with friends is fairly minimal since participants reported meeting friends in person on many occasions, reducing the need to coordinate face-to-face interactions. This is yet another reason for participants’ basic mobile phone use pattern.

**CONCLUSION**

This paper focuses on communication patterns within friendworks of adult women in one Australian sea change town. Specific communication patterns are evident when examining face-to-face, landline telephone, internet and mobile phone use. Face-to-face interactions were found to be the most common and preferred communication method with local as well as distant friends. The internet, followed by the landline telephone, are used more often to communicate with distant friends. Lastly, mobile phone use was the least practiced communication method, mainly due to cost issues.

Drawing on the social history of the landline telephone, one can observe a similar pattern applicable to the mobile phone. Both were initially marketed as business tools (Martin, 1991) hence used strictly to control the incurring costs. Later as use costs reduced, both technologies were widely embraced for domestic communication, addressing instrumental as well as emotional gratifications.

Seminal landline telephone studies highlight the social and emotional support that the
landline telephone facilitates, especially for women (Moyal, 1992; Rakow, 1992). The Australian government followed Moyal’s recommendations with relevant legislation regulating a policy of untimed local calls (fixed rate for local telephone calls), which facilitates longer local communication. The decreasing costs backed by government policy were crucial in turning the landline telephone into the most common telecommunication device for social purposes.

However, this was not evident in mobile phone use among the case study participants. Though mobile phone cost has significantly dropped since this technology has been available in Australia (ITU, 2009), participants reported it is still considerably high and perceived as higher than the landline telephone. As a result, they choose to limit their social communication over the mobile phone.

This paper follows the uses and gratification theory to explain the poor mobile phone use pattern among the case study participants, especially in comparison with cross-national findings (Pink, 2007; Wajcman et al., 2008). The current mobile phone policy and primarily cost issues do not adequately address the case study participants. It is proposed that this incompatibility is ascribed to a wider population, primarily sea changers, but also retirees, single parents, the unemployed and other of “society’s most vulnerable groups” (1989, p. 83).

A closer examination of the needs of these population segments is required in order to better address their gratifications when using telecommunications. Drawing on similar studies of landline telephone use, needs should focus on social and emotional aspects; crucial for individuals’ well being, yet consistently underestimated.

**Endnotes**

1. A friendwork is one network-of-friends of one person. The plural form, friendworks, is used whenever a few networks of a few participants are collectively discussed.
2. Unpaid activity not for business purposes.
3. Counterurbanisation was originally observed during the 1970’s in the United States (Champion, 1989) as well as in Europe (Boyle & Halfacree, 1998).
4. This figure excludes residents of capital cities along the coast.
5. A shire is a local government area (a third level of government under the federal and the state levels). Within the Richmond-Tweed region (which is a part of the Northern Rivers area of NSW), there are six local government areas.
7. All mentioned statistics are based on housing and population data by The Australian Bureau of Statistics (2007).
8. Participants were asked to name all their friends while providing further information on each friend.
9. For each friend, participants graphically marked the most dominant communication method as well as overall interactions’ frequency.
10. Next to each quote, the participant’s age is enclosed in brackets.
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DEVELOPMENT, CULTURAL MAINTENANCE AND TRADITIONAL OWNERS: THE LNG DEVELOPMENT PROPOSAL AT JAMES PRICE POINT IN THE KIMBERLEY

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Abstract: Deep divisions have surfaced amongst Indigenous communities over the proposal to establish a Liquefied Natural Gas (LNG) precinct in the Kimberley, 60 km north of Broome. While ‘cultural survival’ underpins the argument put forward by both Indigenous supporters and critics of this development proposal, they appear to have opted for very different paths. A key question is: how do Indigenous people negotiate agreements with the State and mining companies in such a way as to maintain their distinct cultural understandings of themselves and accumulate adequate financial resources to safeguard their cultural survival? This paper examines the experiences of more recent native title settlements to see how they relate to the Kimberley LNG development discourses; interprets sample texts in relation to cultural maintenance within the prevailing dominant Western economic social system; and finally, raise questions about the challenges ahead for traditional owners.

INTRODUCTION: THE CASE STUDY

At the Centre for Indigenous Excellence in Redfern, Sydney on 10th February 2010 when the former Federal Judge, Murray Wilcox QC spoke at his book launch, the co-Chair of the Traditional Owners Negotiating Committee, Frank Perriman and other Indigenous people from the Kimberley held protest placards outside the building, two of which read: ‘Jabirr Jabirr people will not be the world’s next conservation’; ‘We don’t talk for someone else’s country’. Perriman and his associates support the LNG plant proposal while Mr Wilcox and his fellow speakers at the launch, Senior Law Boss and Registered Applicant of Goolarabooloo Jabirr NTG, Joseph Roe and Bard man, Albert Wiggan oppose it. In their effort to halt the LNG development proposal, the voluntary environmental awareness group, ‘Save the Kimberley’ intends to send copies of the new publication, Kimberley at the Crossroads: The Case Against the Gas Plant to all members of Federal and WA State Parliament.

The LNG precinct will be built on a site - Walmadany (James Price Point) - that is subject to native title claims. The Kimberley Land Council (KLC) represents the native title claimants of the area encompassing this site; the Goolaraboloo and Jabirr Jabirr traditional owners. On April 27, 2009, they signed the Heads of Agreement (HOA) through KLC, with Woodside Energy Ltd and the WA State Government in support of the project. The HOA formed the basis for an Indigenous Land Use Agreement (ILUA) that was sent to the National Native Title Tribunal (NNTT) for registration. Once registered, the commitments made in their agreement over the Browse Basin gas plant will be binding. A steadily increasing number of traditional owners, however, dispute the claim that they consented to the establishment of the gas precinct at James Price Point. They questioned the validity of the meeting when the in-principle agreement was signed because they claimed that they had not been informed that a vote would be taken during the 14-15 April 2009 meeting.

Before Woodside Energy Ltd and its partners - Chevron Corp, Royal Dutch Shell Plc, BP Plc and BHP Billiton Ltd can begin the project, State Government approval processes such as the Strategic Assessment Report, Social Impact Assessments, Tourism Impact Assessment, Environment Assessment report and Aboriginal Heritage Evaluation, need to be completed. The government departments involved are: the Office of Native Title (ONT), which administers the native title policy and plays a central role in the resolution of native title claims; the Department of Mines and Petroleum (DMP), representing the State as a party in many ‘future act’ arbitral proceedings in the National Native Title Tribunal; and the Department of Indigenous Affairs (DIA), which administers the Aboriginal Heritage Act 1972 (AHA) and provides advice to Government on Aboriginal heritage policy.

This LNG development proposal, an initiative of the Western Australian government in partnership with Woodside Energy Ltd, involves natural gas conversion into LNG from the Browse Basin gas fields located 400 km offshore. LNG takes up much less space than gaseous natural gas and can be shipped for export much more efficiently. Alternative gas processing sites would be more expensive to develop, as they are farther away from James Price Point. One is located in Karratha, near the Pilbara. Using Floating Liquefied Natural Gas technology on a ship, originally proposed by Shell, is another option.

When the Resources Minister, Martin Ferguson warned Woodside’s junior partners on the Browse Basin gas venture that their licences would not be renewed if they did not make an investment decision by early March 2010, they agreed to join Woodside in building the gas-processing precinct at James Price Point. Their final investment decision is not expected until mid-2012. In 2009, KLC was also under pressure from the WA State Government. If a decision on the LNG proposal was not made within the timeframe, the State Government threatened to resort to compulsory acquisition. In both the Burrup and MG-Ord native title agreements, the State similarly issued compulsory acquisition notices. As one negotiator puts it, ‘[the State] will take your land anyway. Burrup is a highly religious, spiritual site. We didn’t want development but understood we had no veto’ (Guest, p. 21).

Tax and export revenue derived from LNG companies contributes billions of dollars to the Australian economy. Global demand for energy sources, especially from China and India, puts the State’s position in natural alignment with resource developers whose activities have an impact on the Broome community. This community includes Indigenous people who still have a strong link to their tradition and heritage. In the Shire of Broome, 27.2% out of 15,000 residents are Indigenous. The proposed LNG site is at Walmadany, the heart of the Lurujarri trail, a site-specific cultural heritage following a section of an unbroken Song Cycle that stretches from the tip of the Dampier Peninsula to Bidyadanga, south of Broome. The late Paddy Roe OAM, Joseph
Roe’s grandfather started this trail (Wilcox, p. 46). Joseph Roe believes the LNG development on this site will destroy their cultural heritage. Environmental groups oppose the development proposal, arguing that it will pose a threat to coral reefs, remnant rainforests and the humpback whale area. KLC, on the other hand, supports it, convinced that the revenue to be derived from the enterprise will help close the gap between the standards of living of Kimberley Aboriginal people and the broader Australian community.

How Indigenous people of diverse backgrounds negotiate the paradoxical relationship between newness and conservation, cross-cultural adaptation and identity maintenance, is rarely observed in scientific literature (Kim, 2001, pp.67-68). The LNG development proposal in Broome can provide invaluable insight into what is often seen as the paradox of cultural integration and differentiation. This article examines the experiences of more recent native title settlements to see how they relate to the Kimberley LNG development discourses. To do so I will analyse text from the Kimberley in relation to cultural maintenance within the prevailing dominant Western economic social system. This will allow the article to discuss the challenges ahead for traditional owners.

**Native Title Settlements**

The idea of culture as distinct or as a discrete entity in agreement making is a challenge for Indigenous people who are called upon to demonstrate possession of a ‘traditional culture’. Traditional owners who want their cultural status recognised are required for legal purposes to officially lodge a claim as set by the Native Title Act. Traditional owners who have not lodged claims would not have the statutory eligibility that gains them access to particular rights. They are, however, regarded as ‘traditional owners’ even when they have not yet lodged claims. Claim groups who are successful in their claim have to become or be represented by prescribed bodies corporate (PBC) so that they can exercise procedural rights on behalf of the recognised native title holders (Ritter, 2009a: 25).

A key question is how do Indigenous people negotiate agreements with the State and mining companies in such a way as to maintain their distinct cultural understandings of themselves and accumulate adequate financial resources to safeguard their cultural survival? The Indigenous relationship to land is diverse and complex and it differs from a Western perspective. Merlan’s work (2006, pp101-102), for example, highlights ‘the interactive constitution of Indigenous-non-Indigenous identities and a diversity of relations to land’. Recognising these differences enables us to anticipate potential conceptual barriers that will be encountered. However, this leads to the question of how Indigenous and non-Indigenous negotiators decide which of the understandings behind their different concepts of land, development, and ‘ownership’ to include in decision-making?

Brown (2003) observes that unexpressed conflicting notions of what ‘development’ means or what constitutes (cultural) ‘ownership’ could block understandings between Indigenous and non-Indigenous negotiating parties. A case in point is the observation by Roger Cook, former Executive Director of Yamatji Malpa Bana Baba Maaja Aboriginal Corporation that ‘governments approached negotiations from a purely legal angle of statutory obligations rather than a more expansive recognition of rights’ (Guest, 2009, p. 20). Government sees native title as ‘critical to economic development’. For Indigenous people, the recognition of their prior sovereignty elevates their relationship with government from ‘supplication to one of partnership’ (Guest, 2009, p. 48). A key finding from a comparative study of social and economic development on American Indian reservations undertaken since 1987 to assess and foster the conditions under which sustained social and economic development can be achieved resonates with remote Australian Indigenous communities:
economic development is first and foremost a political problem about what cultural systems of governance are empowered by economic development and who has effective decision-making power in relation to such development (Guest, 2009, p. 8).

Two approaches underpin this Harvard Project finding. One is reactive, that is, a response to external proposals for economic development on American Indian reservations that relies on government funding. Within this approach, Indigenous culture, customs and laws are seen as an obstacle to development. The other is from a ‘nation building model of economic development’, that is, a focus on cultural match where governance structures fit the groups’ customary law standards, reflect their needs and aspirations as a cultural entity, and recognize their culturally legitimate systems of leadership. In the Burrup Agreement in Australia, the decision-making process used was basically dictated by the short timeframes imposed by the State. The State based their timeframes on the ‘immutable commercial deadlines’ set by five international companies (Guest, p. 26, p.28). The unrealistic timeframe would have made it difficult to develop a culturally appropriate decision-making process.

Dodson and Smith (2003, pp. 18-20) assert that developing effective governance systems could ‘only be done at the local level with appropriate and other government support’. The State’s funding contribution to the negotiation team is thus essential in enabling the community to give informed consent and implement agreements. In this sense, the community is beholden to the State’s distribution of funding needed for community development. Wayne Bergmann, the Executive Director of the Kimberley Land Council, stated in a press release that ‘NTRBs across the country all share the pressures of inadequate funding’. The KLC presented a proposed budget of $6.6 million for the 2003-2004 financial year based on the Federal Court’s timetables, to its funding body, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Services. KLC’s shortfall of $2.6 million in 2003 apparently affected its ability ‘to negotiate agreements outside the litigation process’⁶. Clearly Native Title Representative Bodies (NTRB) have to rely on government funds to carry out their responsibilities. Adequate funding is critical not only in developing effective governance systems but also in carrying out NTRB’s responsibilities. The power imbalance reflected in funding allocation and unrealistic timeframes deflect from the ideal Indigenous notion of the State cultivating a more or less equal ‘partnership’ with a ‘sovereign’ (Aboriginal) entity.

**THE LNG KIMBERLEY DEVELOPMENT PROPOSAL**

All traditional owners in the Kimberley share concern about the protection of cultural and environmental heritage. In practice, however, KLC wants to have a substantial economic participation in resource development; engage with government as a partner in decision-making about how funding is distributed in the Federal Government’s ‘Closing the Gap’ policy; have some say over industrial development in the Kimberley; address major Indigenous social problems; and break away from welfare dependency⁷. There is no dispute about the legitimacy of the traditional owners, nor their concern for the need for support for Indigenous health, education, employment and other basic living requirements in the Kimberley. The difference is that KLC wants to obtain economic leverage to improve the living conditions of Aboriginal people. It wants to find a balance between cultural and environmental heritage protection and development, as KLC Executive Director, Wayne Bergmann explains:

> Traditional Owners have put the highest value on sustaining our cultural heritage and the integrity of our environment, while also taking responsibility for developing opportunities to improve the economic and social conditions of Kimberley Aboriginal people.⁸
Seemingly altering its commitment to sustaining Aboriginal cultural and environmental heritage to be part of the government’s development program is a precarious balancing act. An interpretation of KLC’s position from *The Australian* is:

> to give up a pinprick at James Price Point is a tiny price to pay to save the Kimberley from open industrial slather, while creating needed jobs and economic security.  

Goolarabooloo Custodian, Joseph Roe’s rebuttal is:

> I don’t think you’ve got to give up one part of the area to save the Kimberley. I want to keep my culture and heritage alive, not destroy it…it’s up to the federal and state governments to support health, education and other basics, and these shouldn’t be dependent on a land deal.

If it is true that Indigenous organisations are codified within corporate structures, the challenge is ‘to develop and manage a distinctively Aboriginal organisation…which pays particular attention to the governance of their relationships with their constituencies’ yet still engage effectively with the wider society (Martin, p. 122). The analysis then relates to two levels of consideration: at the level of Traditional Owners’ consolidation of their range of opinions into a unified voice that KLC takes to the negotiating table; at the institutional level of KLC representing this voice within political processes that fit into a legal structure laid out in particular kinds of managerial and organisational processes.

KLC’s representation of Traditional Owners at the cultural level should also be seen as ‘authentic’, that is, accountable to its constituency. KLC’s negotiation strategy within legal and political processes at the institutional level must be effective, and the interest of Traditional Owners’ must be represented within those political processes. To do this, KLC needs to have an understanding and the skills needed to go through the relevant political structures and processes. While Sullivan (2006) argues that ‘Aboriginal culture is not constituted in such a way that it can be reflected in effective modern organisations in any deep sense’, the fact is, processing native title claims is complex. As Ritter (2009b, p. 40) suggests, ‘process managerialism’ and ‘information management’ influence the processing of these claims so that institutions overseeing native title tend to look upon agreements as ‘outputs’. The political environment around KLC’s representation of Traditional Owners then includes the approval system for resource development applications by mining companies and the legal provisions that shape Indigenous negotiations with them.

From an Aboriginal perspective, ‘ownership’ is seen within an intimate and deep knowledge of specific places. Particular individuals by virtue of their knowledge about the land are recognized as custodians of certain places. Names of places are not so much attached to the land; rather, the individuals or clan groups identify with the names of their ‘country’. Joseph Roe explains:

> For many traditional people, a specific tree, animal or place that some relationship to the time of their conception – their heart’s first beat – becomes their ‘rai’, or spirit essence. It is to this place that a person’s spirit returns when they die. The ‘rai’ of the person and the country of the same essential vibrational spirit are connected by ‘le-an’ (‘spirit’ or ‘feeling connection’). If country is affected, the person is also affected. Only people with ‘rai’ connection can speak for their country...The LNG Gas Precinct proposal is a dangerous and frightening prospect for the Traditional Owners and Custodians. Without country, there can be no Culture. Law cannot be practised. Nor can the Country be ‘kept quiet’ and safe. The site-specific cultural heritage has arisen directly from this coastline. It cannot
be relocated or put on hold while Country is destroyed for Industry. No amount of compensation money can substitute for it\(^1\).

Joseph Roe, Senior Law Boss and Law Keeper for Goolarabooloo Jabirr Jabirr, claims custodianship obligation for the LNG site, Walmadany (James Price Point). His grandfather, Paddy Roe astounded many researchers with the historical depth and range of his knowledge (Benterrak et.al. 1996, p. 76). Researchers understood that Indigenous people’s ‘reading the country’ offers a range of purposes so that each reading discloses the ‘services’ the place can provide. Hence, what is produced from each reading is a ‘partial’ knowledge of country. A geological reading of country matches with the ‘natural’ \textit{relationship} to the purpose of mining (p. 76). In terms of ownership and development, one has to appreciate first of all how Indigenous people relate identity to land and kinship. In Indigenous worldview, there is no distinct dichotomy between ‘nature’, ‘culture’ and ‘people’ in contrast to European understanding where the land has only one name ‘put to the service of a succession of sovereign owners, starting with the Queen...’ (Benterrak et. al., 1996, p. 147). Land for Indigenous people is both a source of livelihood and ‘the sentient landscape created by their Ancestral being’ (Altman, 2009, p. 29). The State, on the other hand, sees the land as something to be developed, and a source of revenue.

\textbf{Textual Analysis}

The presence of minerals within Indigenous estates now constitutes over twenty per cent of the Australian continent as a result of native title laws. Mining companies and the WA State Government have recognised the economic possibilities for development. Indigenous people consequently have to negotiate their way around maintaining their culture and embracing the development agenda in the market to safeguard their own cultural survival (Behrendt and Kelly, p.23). Some believe that they can negotiate commercially with mining companies and still maintain their identity and distinct cultural processes (Trigger, 2005). Others believe that culture in agreement making can have a role within economic systems only when it is ‘commodified’ (Scambary, 2009; Dixon and Dillon, p. 170). Or, is it a mutually exclusive choice between tradition and modernity (Sullivan, 2005)?

KLC, an organization, which in comparison has broader official links with governments and the mass media, also needs to be politically astute when it wages its battles on many fronts, including within its own constituency. The following media text samples illustrate KLC’s some of its struggles against the WA State:

The Kimberley Land Council has called on the West Australian Government to review its policy in the Kimberley after claims were made that Traditional Owners are holding up housing in remote communities...“The KLC has not been given the opportunity to consult with Traditional Owners and therefore cannot be accused of blocking the building of new homes in the Kimberley’s,” said Mr Bergmann...For years communities in the Kimberley’s have been struggling to get homes built. Less that 20 percent of Aboriginal Australians own their own homes compared to more that 70 percent for the non-Indigenous population. The KLC believe there are other ways to provide housing certainty without extinguishing Native Title. Traditional Owners should not have to sacrifice their native title for projects, which are beneficial for the community. It is the Government policy that is locking us out and blocking housing development in the Kimberley’s (KLC press release, 10 February, 2009).\(^1\)
against the Federal Government:

Traditional owners have threatened to withdraw their support for a gas development at James Price Point if they do not get a say on how Federal Government funding in the Kimberley will be spent. The Government has committed to spending $340 million under the Close the Gap program in the West Kimberley. The funding is in addition to a benefits package being negotiated with oil and gas company Woodside. The negotiating committee’s chairman, Wayne Barker, says the Government has been given two weeks to provide details of how its money will be spent (ABC, 3 November 2009);13

against the gas company, Woodside in December 2008:

The Kimberley Land Council today confirmed that Traditional Owners have refused to accept a mining company proposal to develop gas resources that required them to sign away their cultural heritage rights for the development site without even specifying the location. KLC Executive Director Wayne Bergmann said that the proposal by Woodside Energy Ltd offered no equity participation and was one of the worst offered by a resource development company to Traditional Owners in Australia in recent history;14 and

against an environmental awareness group/other traditional owners:

The Kimberley Land Council (KLC) is using internet site YouTube to counteract the anti-industrialisation message being spruiked by the Save the Kimberley foundation. Earlier this year native title holders from Broome and the Dampier Peninsula struck a $1-billion deal with the Western Australian Government that has paved the way for the construction of a gas processing plant at James Price Point. Traditional owner Henry Augustine is featured on the website, speaking about the negotiations that were held between the KLC, the State Government and Woodside. “People think that we’re selling out, but we’re not selling out, we’ve got to go down this road,” he said. “If we don’t participate or say yes or no or negotiate, then we’ll be left how we were when colonisation left us - with nothing.”We’re being shot at by our own people, environmentalists and other individuals and Government.”15

In contrast, a predominant ‘cultural’ discourse perhaps attracts a different kind of audience and media. For example, a group of Roe’s supporters including Alan and Stephen Pigram (from the local Broome band, the Pigram Brothers) organised a ‘Concert for Heritage’ to raise awareness about the ‘plight of the Kimberley’. Their flyer states:

(The) idea of the gathering is more a celebration than a protest concert -- a celebration of Country. While others rightly protest the desecration of country, the heritage concert celebrates the land, the culture and the power of the country.

This positive approach seems to be an attempt at depoliticizing heritage and cultural issues to avoid dividing families and clans while still putting on the community’s agenda an important development issue.

KLC, while engaged in a robust argument with the Government over resourcing, finds alignment with the Federal Government’s ‘Closing the Gap’ program. For many years, shocking reports such as Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage: Key Indicators 2009 highlighted appalling conditions that need addressing particularly in remote areas.16 By releasing comparative statistics that disclose the depth of Indigenous disadvantage, the Government is able to use
this policy to argue for a more intensive industrial development to close that gap. KLC, on the other hand, wants to assert a partnership role with the Government in how the ‘Closing the Gap’ policy is implemented so that Indigenous people are able to participate in decisions about development issues that have an impact on their lives, their culture and their traditional land. ‘Closing the Gap’ has thus developed into a discursive force as seen by the way both the WA Government and KLC use the concept behind the policy to marshal their arguments. Although a range of government policies had been tried to address Indigenous issues from assimilation, self-determination, practical reconciliation, shared responsibility agreements and national intervention, it is with the ‘Closing the Gap’ policy that some Indigenous advocates seem to have found a common platform with the Federal and State Governments.

In summary, I have shown samples of ‘text’ from a traditional owner explaining the threat posed by LNG development on their country, culture and the practice of their Law. I have also cited text that illustrates KLC’s representation of traditional owners’ support for sustaining their cultural and environmental heritage while accessing opportunities to improve their economic and social conditions. I have shown samples of social interaction and practices, which constitute the production process of text (Fairclough, 2001, 2005) -- for example, ‘the Concert for Heritage’ (practice) and KLC’s public statements addressed separately to Woodside Energy Ltd, the Federal and State Governments on specific issues (social interaction). The approval from various government instrumentalities that have to be completed before the James Price Point LNG project could even start and the negotiation that KLC is currently undertaking with Woodside Energy Ltd, are ‘processes’ that are also part of the production process of text. The next question to reflect upon is: what are the social conditions underlying the production process of text from social actors such as Wayne Bergmann and Joseph Roe?

In portraying society as a whole, Altman describes the local as situated within the global domain. He illustrates how the local and the global are enmeshed in the ideological dynamic of power relations:

At the start of the twenty-first century there has been an acceleration of a new economic order predicated on world trade and energy-intensive industrialization that is right now being challenged by a global slowdown. As a commodity –export dependent economy, Australia has been at the vanguard of the neoliberal order that has been so dominant in recent years ... At such a time it is extremely difficult for any alternative development perspective, based on proven links to land and continuity of custom, to gain political traction. This is especially the case because the Australia state is in the process of depoliticising Indigenous institutions and mainstream political channels (to) reflect the views of the majority only. (My italics) -- Altman, J. 2009. Indigenous communities, miners and the state in Australia in Altman, J. and D. Martin (eds) Power, Culture, Economy: Indigenous Australians and Mining. ANU E Press.

The enmeshed relationship of the State government and the mining company, Woodside Energy Ltd can be seen in how the LNG development initiative is mobilized. The LNG project is an initiative of the WA Government and Woodside Energy Ltd is its foundation commercial proponent. The Department of State Development is the government department responsible for working with resource developers to expedite approval processes in order to progress major industry and infrastructure projects. Describing the WA State Government and Woodside’s relationship in this way underscores the entwined interests of the State Government and mining companies.

At a broader level, Australian society as a whole is not immune from globalization currents
such as the global demand for energy particularly from emerging political power centres such as China and India. On the supply side, mining companies are actively and constantly obtaining sales commitment from potential overseas buyer countries even before gas production and processing of natural gas into LNG have begun. The planning is inevitably long term. Global oil supply is on the wane and gas as an energy source is on the horizon. On the domestic front, the Australian Government also needs to find a reasonable balance between the country’s gas exports and our own domestic gas energy needs. Considering the huge capital expenditure required for gas exploration and infrastructure building, gas proponents demand a reasonable level of certainty from the Federal and State governments to protect their investments. The revenue to be gained from mining companies’ activities in the country is eyed by the Australian Government to fund its industrial development and its other programs. It is in this sense that the government’s interest is in natural alignment with that of mining companies.

On 3 October 2009, a Preliminary Development Agreement was signed between the State Government and Woodside to enable studies and planning for the precinct to progress. Such State agreements are a contract between the Government of Western Australia and proponents of major resources projects. These contracts specify the rights, obligations, terms and conditions for development of the project and establish a framework for ongoing relations and cooperation between the State and the project proponent. They are ratified by an Act of the State Parliament. As for Traditional Owners, a system exists for agreement making through the Native Title Act that allows them and resource developers to explore and operate their activities on lands that have significance for Indigenous peoples and their communities. On 25 February 2010, the Yawuru community in Broome signed two successful Indigenous Land Use Agreements (ILUAs) negotiated by the KLC involving over 5300 square kilometres of land in a native title deal worth nearly $200 million. These two events in Fairclough’s Critical Discourse Analysis are metaphorically classified as ‘Objects’ because they are real ‘in the sense that they are given a particular status in the material world’.

The Broome case study of the LNG development proposal promises to provide invaluable insights into the social changes that occur as a consequence of interactions between the structures of resource development and Traditional Owners. It is possible to access diverse discursive constructions of Aboriginality by documenting their social practices, statements, interactions, processes and events in relation to the LNG development proposal. How these diverse ‘voices’ is represented in resource development discussions through the processes of their own internal governance system and through their interactions with the institutions of Government will throw light into the emergence of new social formations.

Some have accused the state of making what should be unconditional citizenship rights dependent on Aboriginal people embracing the development agenda. This appears to have validity when funding for housing, education and improvement to existing government services and facilities are mentioned as part of ‘compensation to the native title party’ through the Commonwealth Government’s ‘Closing the Gap’ initiative. Indeed critics of agreement making over native title observe that major mining agreements do not deliver substantive, meaningful benefits to the Aboriginal parties and that compensatory payments involve the substitution of monetary benefits with goods and services that are entitlements to all citizens (Martin, p.99).

That Aboriginal people as cultural subjects and custodians of the land are acknowledged in KLC’s negotiation role is expected. However, in order for Aboriginal disadvantage to be addressed, it appears that KLC finds that compromises are inevitable. Ironical as it may seem, both KLC and the State Government cite the Federal Government’s policy of ‘Closing the Gap’ in support of the LNG development proposal. But the gap between the living conditions of
Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians is seen as so huge that the rationale advanced by Indigenous negotiators at bottom is not so much about development but about ‘cultural survival’.

What will be the impact of development on Indigenous people in remote areas? To what extent can they effectively engage and participate in the projected industrial development growth in Broome and the Kimberley? The cost of living is expected to increase that will reflect more demand on housing, local infrastructure, services and hospitality to accommodate workers on the plant. How will the housing and employment pressure affect Indigenous communities? The initial stages of construction will require between 2500-3500 workers, 450 of which will become permanent workers. Around 64% of the total economy of Broome is currently reliant on tourism estimated to be worth around $411 million. With specialist job requirements in the LNG processing precinct, is it likely that Indigenous people will be gainfully employed once the LNG precinct is built? More questions play in people’s minds. Who are the intended beneficiaries of the LNG agreement and who will turn out to be the real beneficiaries? How are the benefits to be distributed? What input do Traditional Owners have in decisions regarding the distribution of these benefits? Is there any plan for capacity building or training in preparation for the setting up of the precinct or, will most recruits come from a typical ‘fly-in/fly-out’ mining employment mode?

**Conclusion**

The LNG development case study illustrates how text, discourse and social context can be linked. Examples of discursive institutional forces that help constitute Traditional Owners’ views have been shown such as how political and legal processes influence the way in which native title claimants’ interests are to be represented. Is the corporate and State development narrative starting to influence Indigenous thinking and acting? What are the conditions that make this narrative so appealing? This year I will be interviewing traditional owners who are represented by KLC, other traditional owners who are not represented by KLC, and members of the traditional owners negotiating committee to document the range of their views and practices. At the end of my research, I want to demonstrate an understanding of the challenges Indigenous people experience in their effort at determining their own future, sustaining cultural maintenance and obtaining self sufficiency and independence within the prevailing social and economic system. I want to know how specifically are the views of traditional owners represented and what discursive/institutional forces in particular help to constitute those views? I also want to evaluate the costs and benefits of development for Aboriginal Australia through the example of the LNG project in the Kimberley.

If the key Harvard Project finding is any guide to the traditional owners’ plight in the LNG development proposal in the Kimberley, some effort should be exerted into finding the most workable ‘cultural match’ where governance structures fit the groups’ customary law as well as what traditional owners consider their culturally legitimate systems of leadership. If the impact of the proposed development fans out onto the rest of the Kimberley region, traditional owners other than Goolarabooloo and Jabir Jabirr could claim that their interest in what happens at Walmadany is also at stake. The challenge for the Government and the Indigenous Law Bosses is to develop the kind of cultural systems of governance that are empowered—one that can serve an Indigenous and non Indigenous ‘nation building model of Australia’s economic development’.
ENDNOTES


2. The only item of business on the KLC published Agenda for that meeting (14-15 April 2009) was ‘Update on Negotiations about the Premier’s Nomination for a Gas Precinct around James Price Point’. See Wilcox, Murray (2009), Kimberley at the Crossroads The case against the gas plant, Broome: Save the Kimberley P/L., p. 52.


11. Wilcox, op.cit., p. 40


16. See also KLC’s commissioned report ‘New research ranks Kimberley Indigenous People the most disadvantaged in the nation’, http://www.klc.org.au/media/090226_ANU_Research.pdf


20. Norman Fairclough and his colleagues developed Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as a way of shifting analytical approaches so that the macro social aspects of discourse are not neglected (Phillips et. al., 2008).


REFERENCES


BUILDING INDIGENOUS SOCIAL CAPITAL IN AN ONLINE WORLD

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Abstract: This paper examines the nexus between social relations of mutual benefit, information communication technology (ICT) access and social inclusion. More specifically, a case study methodology is used to examine the role of ICT in facilitating the social capital of Indigenous communities. A remote Indigenous community in the Northern Territory (NT) is the focus of the paper. Whilst the potential of social capital to affect positive outcomes across a diverse range of areas is well researched, Indigenous disadvantage is well documented and the role of ICT in facilitating social and economic development is well established, although little is known about the ICT social capital nexus in an Indigenous context. The paper commences with a review of the social capital literature. A description of the methodology employed in the data collection phase of the project is followed by the case study. The paper concludes with a summary of the findings and recommendations for further research.

INTRODUCTION: THE CASE STUDY

Social capital and social inclusion are two separate concepts that are used to describe the implications of social interaction. In the context of this paper, the concepts can be understood as a framework that explores the benefits of access to information communication technology (ICT). The potential of ICT to disseminate information quickly, to reach vast numbers of people simultaneously and to include the previously excluded is immense. Consequently, this paper examines the nexus between social relations of mutual benefit, ICT access and social inclusion. More specifically, a case study methodology is used to examine the role of information communication technology (ICT) in facilitating the social capital of Indigenous communities. A remote Indigenous community in the Northern Territory (NT) is the focus of the paper.

Social capital is an elusive concept and there is considerable debate as to what is actually meant by the term. According to Stone (2000) the essence of social capital is quality social relations. Winter (2000a), suggests that social capital encompasses “…social relations of mutual benefit characterised by norms of trust and reciprocity” (p.1). Social capital is, according to Grootaert (1998), “… the glue that holds societies together and without which there can be no
economic growth or human well-being" (p.1). The ABS and the OECD define social capital as “… networks, together with shared norms, values and understandings which facilitate cooperation within or among groups” (ABS, 2004a, p.5; OECD, 2001, p.1). According to the ABS (2004a:5) the OECD definition of social capital is emerging as a common basis for international comparability. Consequently, this paper has also adopted the ABS and OECD definition.

The positive benefits of the quality social relations that constitute social capital are reported to have implications for a range of areas including education, social and economic development and social and civic stability (ABS, 2002b; Cox, 1996; Fukuyama, 1999; Putnam, 1993). Social capital, the ABS (2004a) claims, may also help mitigate the effects of social and economic disadvantage and “… assist in supporting the development of sustainable local communities, including rural and remote areas …” (p.1).

Whilst the potential for social capital to affect positive outcomes across a diverse range of areas is well researched; Indigenous disadvantage is well documented (Banks, 2003, 2005; Productivity Commission, 2003a); and the role of ICT in facilitating social and economic development is well established (Clarke, Durand, & Pilat, 2001; Colecchia & Schreyer, 2002; DCITA, 2005a), little is known about the ICT social capital nexus in an Indigenous context. Consequently, this paper examines the relationship between social capital and ICT access in a remote Indigenous community in the Northern Territory.

The paper commences with a review of the social capital literature. A description of the methodology employed in the data collection phase of the project is followed by the case study. The paper concludes with a summary of the findings and recommendations for further research.

**Literature Review**

A review of the literature revealed a substantial body of research on the topic of social capital. The concept of social capital is, according to Farr (2003), relatively new and still evolving. The origin of the term has been widely attributed to Lydia Hanifan, a rural educator from West Virginia, who first articulated his concept of the civic ideal in 1916 (Farr, 2003; Putnam, 2000; M Woolcock & Narayan, 2000). In the latter half of the twentieth century the conceptual framework of social capital was informed by a number of theorists. Early influential writers were from a range of disciplines including sociology (Coleman, 1988), politics (Putnam, 1995), education (Coleman, 1988) and economics (Fukuyama, 1995).


In the Australian context there are also a number of influential social capital researchers and theorists. Cox (1995a, 1995b, 1995c, 1995d, 1995e, 1995f) has written extensively on the role of social capital in building civil society; Winter (1998, 1999, 2000a, 2000b) has researched social capital and public policy; Stone and Hughes (2000a, 2000b, 2001) have examined the role of social capital in family and community life; and Falk (2001; 2000) has examined the nexus between
social capital and educational outcomes. However, as Brough et al (2006) has acknowledged, there is “…limited research that has specifically examined social capital in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities” (p.3).

Whilst the literature that does exist in regard to Indigenous social capital is limited, it covers a range of areas. Hunter (2000a, 2000b, 2003) has researched the area of social capital, Indigenous unemployment and Indigenous poverty; Gerritsen, Crosby and Fletcher (2000) have examined social capital and Aboriginal community capacity building; Christie and Greatorex (2004) have explored social capital in regard to the Homeland Movement of the Yolngu people in Arnhem Land; Bell and Heathcote (1999) have researched social capital and Indigenous youth; and Brough et al (2006), have examined social capital in an urban Aboriginal context.

The potential of ICT to support the development of social capital in Indigenous communities is acknowledged in a discussion paper prepared by the Department of Communication, Information Technology and the Arts (DCITA, 2005b). However, to date there has been no research that specifically examines the nexus between Indigenous access to ICT and social capital. The lack of literature in regard to ICT and social capital in an Indigenous context indicates that research in this area is clearly warranted.

**Methodology**

Sensitivity to the needs and experiences of Indigenous participants was an overriding concern throughout this study. Low levels of literacy and numeracy amongst Indigenous participants were also significant issues that were taken into consideration with regard to the data collection instruments and research methods employed in the research. Consequently, it was deemed inappropriate to survey the Indigenous community members and a case study approach was adopted. According to Feagin, Orum and Sjoberg (1991), a case study is an ideal methodology when a holistic, in-depth investigation is needed. A participant observer approach was the main methodology employed in the case study. The data collected via observation was triangulated through information gathered in interviews and through a verbally administered questionnaire.

In the course of the data collection phase approximately 10 Indigenous community members were interviewed and consulted. Three interviewees (approximately one per cent of the population) were identified by the community as suitable spokes-people. These three interviewees subsequently consented to participate in a detailed semi-structured interview. These interviews explored in depth the social processes, the social capital indicators present in the community as well as community access to telecommunications services. The multi-perspective analysis enabled a range of experience and knowledge to contribute to the study. Multiple perspectives is, according to Tellis (1997), one of the most salient characteristics of a case study approach:

This means that the researcher considers not just the voice and perspective of the actors, but also of the relevant groups of actors and the interaction between them….They give a voice to the powerless and voiceless. (p.1)

The interviews were structured around a questionnaire which incorporated the core concepts from a survey developed by Narayan and Cassidy (2001). The questionnaire employed statistically validated questions for measuring social capital in developing countries. This questionnaire was administered verbally. The three participants all held a significant role in the community: they were employed full time and were recognised by the community as representative of the views of the community. All three participants were traditional land owners, and all three were women.
Permission from the Tiwi Land Council to undertake research was obtained prior to conducting the study. The project also had the full support and cooperation of the participating community.

**Northern Territory Context**

The NT is geographically isolated from all the major population centres in Australia. The physical isolation of the Territory is also compounded by a relatively young, widely dispersed, very multicultural and often highly mobile population (Department of Immigration and Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs, 2003). Of the 202,793 people who inhabit the Territory, the majority of the population reside in the major urban areas of the NT (ABS, 2006b:53). More than 50 per cent of the population reside in Darwin, the capital city. As of June 2003, approximately 25 per cent of the total Territory population lived in the remotes area of the NT (ABS, 2006a). According to the NT Government (2003:11) there are over 700 small communities located in the remote regions of the Territory. The communities range in size from less than 50 inhabitants to a population of more than 250 people.

The estimated resident Indigenous population in the NT at June 2001 was 56,875 – approximately 29 per cent of the total Territory population (ABS, 2006b). This is significantly higher than the national average where the Indigenous population represents approximately 2 per cent of the total Australian population. As of June 2003, the majority of the population who lived in the remote regions of the Territory were of Indigenous descent (ABS, 2006b).

**Case Study – The Context**

Bathurst and Melville Island constitute the Tiwi islands. Both islands are located approximately 70 km north of Darwin. The islands, which are freehold Aboriginal land, are separated by the Aspley Strait. The total land mass of the islands is approximately 7492 sq km. Melville Island is the largest of the two and it is the largest island, apart from Tasmania, off mainland Australia.

The Tiwi population of Melville and Bathurst Island form a homogeneous cultural and linguistic group. The majority of the Tiwi population are of Indigenous descent, Catholicism is the predominant religion on the islands, and the vast majority of the population speak an Indigenous language. With a median age of 24.8 years, the Tiwi population is relatively young. As of 2001, 84.6 per cent of the population was aged 45 years or less, and approximately 33.6 per cent of the population were under 15 years of age (ABS, 2003a).

The community of Milikapiti which is located on the northern coast of Melville Island was the focus of the case study. Apart from the three main communities of Milikapiti, Nguiu and Pirlcingimpi, the Tiwi islands are largely uninhabited (TILG, 2004). At the time of the case study the Indigenous population of Milikapiti was, according to the Milikapiti Community Development Officer, approximately 385. Approximately 30 non-Indigenous people were also resident in the community.

The population of all three Tiwi communities fluctuates. The mobility of the population is due to attendance at ceremonies, visits to the mainland, admissions to the Darwin hospital and general migration to and from other Indigenous communities. A significant number of the adolescent population are also sent to Darwin to attend boarding school. The students return home to attend ceremonies and for school holidays.

Despite their relative proximity to Darwin, the Tiwi people of Milikapiti have managed to retain many traditional customs and practices. Although early mission contact entrenched Catholicism on the islands, ceremonial life is still an important aspect of the social and cultural traditions of the Tiwi people. At Milikapiti, there appears to be little difficulty reconciling western
religion with traditional culture and, as recently as 2005, the Tiwi of Milikapiti were observed conducting a traditional Pukumani ceremony in order to mourn the death of a relative.

Milikapiti is located 105 kilometres North East of Darwin. Access to the community, from the mainland, is by air only. A barge service brings freight to the community on a regular basis. A network of dirt roads connects Milikapiti with the two other communities located on the Tiwi Islands. During the Wet Season the roads are often impassable and movement between communities is restricted. However, a sealed, all-weather airstrip and a regular air service between Darwin, Nguiu and Pirlimgimpi does ensure that the community is not totally isolated during the monsoonal downpours that occur during the wet season. Telecommunications access is vital to the community especially at times when precarious weather conditions inhibit travel between communities as well as travel to and from the mainland.

The unemployment rate on the Tiwi islands is high. The ABS (2005) estimates that in 2003 the unemployment rate on both Melville and Bathurst Island was 17.2 per cent. This was significantly higher than the national average of 6.2 per cent for the same period (ABS, 2004b). The community is heavily reliant on government services although there are a number of enterprises currently being undertaken on Melville Island. A forestry project, sand mining and tourism have assisted in boosting employment. On Bathurst Island fish farming is a recent endeavour and has also provided employment opportunities for a number of Tiwi (Tiwi Land Council, 2004).

The majority of the employment at Milikapiti is provided through the Department of Workplace Relations Employment (DEWR) Scheme Community Development Employment Project (CDEP). However, a health centre, the local council, a shop, the Housing Association, a school, the Art Centre, a club and a garage also provide a source of non-subsidized employment for Tiwi community members. The non-Indigenous community members are employed as teachers, nurses, council members and housing administration personnel. The Art Centre Coordinator, community store Manager and Housing Coordinator are also non-Indigenous. A number of ‘itinerant’ non-Indigenous people are also in the community and working, on a contract basis, on the building projects that are being undertaken. These non-Tiwi individuals also reside in the community on a temporary/semi-permanent basis. All non-Tiwi people must apply to the Land Council for a permit to visit the islands.

In 2003, the community of Milikapiti participated in The Electronic Outback Project (EOP). The EOP was a trial program conducted by the communication carrier, Optus. The program aimed to supply satellite access “…into fourteen remote communities and provide public access to payphones, videoconferencing, internet access and fax facilities (Northern Territory Government, 2003:33). Prior to the EOP the community of Milikapiti struggled to function with redundant telecommunications infrastructure, inadequate and insufficient phone lines and a system ill-equipped to handle the transmission of data. The community’s telecommunications infrastructure, a microwave digital radio concentrator system (DRCS), which had been installed in the late 1980s had long outlived its usefulness and was inadequate for the needs of the community.

At the time of the case study, the school, the Health Centre, the local council office, the Housing Association, the recreation centre, the Art Centre and the garage were all equipped with a range of telecommunications facilities which included telephone, fax and internet access. However, despite the EOP, public access to phones, faxes and the internet remained limited. Apart from television and radio there were very few telecommunications services available for public access in the community. There was one public phone at Milikapiti, one Electronic Funds Transfer at Point of Sale (EFTPOS) outlet, and no public internet facility.
The community is highly reliant on government services and consequently telecommunications initiatives have been directed at improving infrastructure in the areas of health and education and to support the provision of local government administration. With high unemployment and a significant proportion of the workforce on CDEP, the demand for improved telecommunications services is, in the immediate future, unlikely to come from local industry. For the general population, access to communication facilities was problematic.

**THE COMMUNITY**

According to the interviewees, the kinship system is, to the Tiwi people, the most significant group to which they belong. All interviewees identified their “family”, their “tribe” and their “skin group” as the group that was the most important to their household. The interviewees also identified their family as the group that is the most homogeneous in terms of language, culture and religion and as the group with whom they interact the most frequently.

Whilst all interviewees acknowledge membership of a number of groups, such as the church group and the community women’s group, these groups were predominantly found within the community and were constituted mainly by family members. One interviewee, who worked as a teacher’s aide at the local school, acknowledged that six of her co-workers were members of her immediate family.

All three expert witnesses were employed in roles that necessitated contact with individuals, groups and organisations beyond the confines of the community. Consequently, they were able to identify eight or more close friends, other than family members, whom they could call on for help or to talk about private matters. The interviewees were also “definitely” able to identify people, other than family members, that they could call on for financial assistance if the need arose. However, close family members were acknowledged by all interviewees as people they would most likely call upon if they had to borrow money.

All three interviewees expressed a general sense of satisfaction and control over their lives. Whilst the interviewees were either “very happy” or “moderately happy” with their life, they also felt they had the power to make important decisions that could change the course of their life. However, when questioned about Local, Territory and Federal Government their responses indicated ambivalence about placing their trust in these authorities. As the interviewees were employed in Education, the Health Service and Police, Fire and Emergency Services, and were highly regarded by the community, there was, at the very least, a degree of trust in these services at the local level. But in general, interviewees thought that “…you could not be too careful when dealing with [some] people”. However, they unanimously agreed that most people in the community would willingly help you if needed.

All interviewees claimed that they frequently socialised with others over food or drink, either in private or in a public place. The socialisation, according to interviewees, was with people from different tribes, different cultures and different linguistic backgrounds. A licensed club operates at Milikapiti. The club is the focal venue for the majority of the social interaction that takes place in the community. This club is open on weekdays for four hours a day and half a day on Saturday. Both Indigenous and non-Indigenous people frequent the club. During the football season almost all community members can be found at the club on Saturday afternoons supporting their local team in the Tiwi Island Football League.

Whilst it was acknowledged that tensions existed in the community, the interviewees regarded the community as friendly. Interviewees cited the cause of the tensions in the community as disputes over landholdings, disputes between tribes, disputes between men and women, and between the older and younger generations. According to all three interviewees, these
disputes had occasionally led to violence. Despite the tensions in the community, interviewees felt moderately safe to very safe when home alone.

The main sources of information that were identified by the three expert witnesses included relatives, friends and neighbours. Two interviewees also identified newspapers, television and the internet. One interviewee identified “community leaders” as one of the main sources of information.

The number of community groups that the three interviewees were involved in ranged from two to “many”. The interviewee who worked as a teacher’s aide at the local school claimed membership of eight significant groups. The groups included tribe, skin group, two school groups, the Aboriginal School Parents Association, the Church, the Council for Aboriginal Alcohol Program Services and the community Women’s Group. This interviewee, in particular, was very involved in community events and frequently volunteered her time and skills to local community groups. She was highly literate in both English and Tiwi and was also frequently called upon to assist visitors. Consequently, her networks were extensive and extended beyond the community. During the case study she was observed with an address book which contained contact detail and phone numbers of her friends, associates and the Tiwi organisation located on the islands.

All three interviewee’s had a strong sense of commitment to their community. They all worked in an area that provided a service to community members such as the school, the health clinic and in law enforcement. All participants acknowledged that they would willingly donate time to a project that would benefit the community. Two interviewees stated that they would also donate money to such a project.

The interviewees identified recent community activities that they, or their family, had been involved in. These activities were undertaken for the benefit of the community. The activities cited included a “clean-up” after Cyclone Ingrid, a category three cyclone which swept through the community in March 2005. A re-enactment of 300 years of white contact was also given as an example of a recent event where the community came together for the benefit of others.

Whilst cooperation by community members to solve a problem that would affect the whole community was considered to be “very likely”, interviewees did not consider the community to be very proactive in organising or petitioning officials/politicians for new services. A petition for a community swimming pool was cited as an example of one of the few times the community had actively sought a new service.

All three interviewees had voted in the last election and all had participated in community activities. Only two of the three interviewees reported that they had been actively involved in community issues, but all three acknowledged that they would willingly support local issues if they were perceived to be of benefit to the whole community.

**Telecommunications Access**

At the time of the case study, telecommunications access was a point of contention in the community and the cause of considerable tension. Interviews conducted with community members revealed that whilst most non-Indigenous residents had a telephone and internet access in their home, very few Indigenous community members had access to these services. Approximately 10 Indigenous households were identified as having a landline and home phone. However, it was also acknowledged that many of these phones were, for a variety of reasons, not always operational. Home internet access was not a priority and, as of 2005, no Tiwi people at Milikapiti were identified as having a home computer. There was one public phone in the
community and no public internet access.

The lack of access to phones and the internet caused both social and organisational problems for the community as a whole. Community members with access to phones, faxes and the internet were often expected to share the facility or are asked to undertake administration tasks on behalf of others. One interviewee admitted that until recently she had a phone installed in her home. The continual pressure from family members wanting to use the phone eventually led to her having the service disconnected. Council Administration workers reported that they had frequently undertaken internet banking on behalf of family members. However, the council staff discontinued this service when it began to interfere with the work they were employed to carry out. A sign prominently displayed in the Health centre which stated: *Telephones in the clinic are not for private use by the community or staff* provided an indication of the social and administrative tension that surround the provision of telephone and internet access in the community.

All three interviewees had access to a telephone and the internet through their work location. The Police Aide did not have a dedicated phone and internet connection but could obtain access through the Council office if necessary. All interviewees used the telephone daily for work related transactions. Whilst the internet was used less frequently, it was accessible.

In September 2005, mobile phone coverage was not available at Milikapiti. However, it was anticipated that a mobile phone tower would be erected before the end of 2005. The installation of a phone tower was part of a project by Telstra to provide the whole of the Tiwi Islands with Code Division Multiple Access (CDMA) phone coverage. According to DCITA (2004), Milikapiti would receive CDMA access through the Towns Under 500 Program.

A mobile phone tower had been installed in the community of Nguiu on Bathurst Island just prior to the commencement of the case study. Phone coverage extended to the mainland and, when towers were erected at Milikapiti and the community of Pirlingimpi, coverage would include the three communities on the Tiwi islands.

In anticipation of the impending availability of mobile phone coverage, a number of Milikapiti community members had purchased a handset. The youth of the community were also very keen to have access to mobile telephony. On a recent school excursion into Darwin, mobile phones were, according to a local school teacher, purchased by most students. Secondary school students who had returned from boarding school on the mainland to attend a mourning ceremony were also observed with mobile phones. Whilst the phones were unable to transmit voice or text data they were used to take digital images of the ceremony.

**Summary**

Indigenous kinship is a complex set of interconnected relationships with well defined obligations and responsibilities that fulfil certain economic and civic virtues. According to Bell and Heathcote (1999) Indigenous kinship and family structures are cohesive forces which bind Aboriginal people together and provide psychological and emotional support:

In all aspects of life, kinship determines rights and obligations and much of a person’s behaviour in a variety of circumstances. Kinship is a social grid that defines people’s identity in relation to one another and to outsiders, and can be interpreted as a web of community groups. (p.3)

Consequently, social relations of mutual benefit characterised by the norms of trust and reciprocity, which are the core of social capital, is also a fundamental aspect of Indigenous cultural identity. As indicated in the case study, networks, together with shared norms, values
and understandings which facilitate cooperation within or amongst groups are also integral to the Indigenous kinship system.

Although all interviewees identified their family as the most homogeneous and the most important group to which they belonged, they also frequently socialised with other clans, cultures and linguistic groups. However, the socialising occurred mainly within the confines of community. Although their networks were on the whole restricted to community and family groups, all interviewees did identify friends they could all upon for assistance. However, these relationships were only observed amongst those community members who had the capacity to sustain them either through face-to-face contact or via access to a telephone or the internet.

Throughout the case study a strong sense of community identity and belonging emerged. The cultural, linguistic and religious homogeneity of the community contributed to a collective Tiwi identity that manifested itself in ceremonies, a shared sense of community and a willingness to contribute and to engage in events for the benefit of the common good. The interviewees all expressed a general sense of satisfaction with their life and felt relatively safe in the community. However, they were wary of placing their trust in local, Territory and Federal Government and they were cautious of some people.

Access to ICT was a contentious issue in the community and was the cause of considerable tension amongst community members. The ICT services that were available were mainly used to support local and NT government administrative services. Whilst public access to ICT was severely restricted, there was a significant ongoing demand for improved access to telephones and the internet. Family obligations and an expectation that community members with access to phones, faxes and the internet would share the services and undertake tasks on behalf of others exacerbated the tension surrounding access to ICT services. In an Indigenous context the sharing of resources is an important source of family support that not only cushions the impact of financial constraints, but also acted as an important form of social control (Hunter, 2000b). The act of ignoring kinship obligations is, according to Schwab and Sutherland (2001), offensive to the whole community and the social reverberations of such an act are long lasting.

The youth of the community were early adopters of ICT. They had exposure and access to mobile telephone at boarding school and were adept in its use. They will, more than likely, drive the adoption of mobile telephony once the CDMA network is operational across the Tiwi Islands.

**Conclusion**

Social capital is an inherent aspect of the complex set of interconnected relationships that constitute the Tiwi kinship system. Within this system are well defined obligations and responsibilities governed by the behavioural norms of reciprocity and trust. The kinship system is overtly expressed and publically reinforced through the act of sharing. At Milikapiti, the social capital accrued through kinship relationships had a number of positive benefits. Employment prospects were enhanced through skin group connections; the tribe was a source of access to information and advice; and financial, social and emotional support was reciprocated family norms.

As evidenced by the case study there was considerable bonding social capital at Milikapiti. The community had a strong sense of identity which was reinforced by the kinship system and their common cultural identity, language and religion. However, the physical and social isolation of the community may have also contributed to the bonding social capital that was evident in the community.
At the time of the case study there was considerable pent up demand for improved ICT access at Milikapiti. Limited access to telephones, to faxes and the internet were the main ICT issues identified by the community. The lack of access to ICT was a cause of frustration and tension. Whilst there were no immediate plans to install public internet access in the community, the proposed CDMA network may alleviate some of these issues. There were indications that the take up of mobile telephony would be prolific.

Improved access to telephones, the internet and ICT services has the potential to mitigate the negative effects of the geographic and social isolation experienced by the community. Access and effective use of ICT has the potential to provide individuals and the community with the increased access to information; the opportunity to network with family members, other significant groups and friends; and provide increased access to services such as banking and government agencies. According to the DCITA (2005b) discussion paper, in an online world Indigenous access to ICT may facilitate generalised and individual trust (p.16); help create and sustain bridging and linking relationships (p.41,53); build and sustain Indigenous networks; as well as assist in promoting Indigenous values such as the importance of country, family traditional law, culture, community and relationships (p.48).

The role of ICT building the social capital of Indigenous communities is an area that needs further research. As DCITA (2005b) has acknowledged, “…for ICT use to move beyond bonding – to harness its power for bridging and linking to resources that enhance economic and social development …more attention [needs to be given] to the type of social capital being developed (p.4). The impact of mobile telephony on Indigenous communities, Indigenous use of the internet, and telecommunications policy in regard to remote Indigenous communities, are some of the areas that also warrant further research.

Endnotes

1. This paper is part of an in-depth analysis of telecommunications access in four communities in the Northern Territory. A synopsis of the research project was published in November 2009 in the Telecommunications Journal of Australia. Vol 59,3.

2. Freehold land is land over which the Crown has granted an interest. Freehold gives the owner of that interest the exclusive right to the land for an indefinite period of time.

3. Throughout the course of the data collection phase of the study the interviewees frequently referred to the Tiwi kinship subsections of family, tribe and skin group. These terms, are used interchangeably in this paper and, when referred to, imply the complex interrelated network of relationships that constitute the Tiwi kinship system.

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FLIP SKIRT FATALES: HOW MEDIA FETISH SIDELINES CHEERLEADERS

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Abstract: Cheerleading is a highly commodified and mass mediated feminised spectacle which attracts intense vitriol from a range of ostensibly disparate social groups. These include feminists, social conservatives, cultural elites, sports administrators and fans, mainstream media commentators and members of the general public. Complicating these negative framings is the fact that cheerleaders are simultaneously sexually fetishised in pornography, pop culture and the news media. That a relatively unremarkable feminine athletic endeavour provokes such intense cultural anxiety and sexual obsession makes cheerleading a singularly revealing object of study. This article uses textual analysis, and fetish, antifandom, scapegoating and anti-Americanism theory to make sense of the ambivalence, obsession, contradiction, sexualisation and disavowal so often associated with cheerleading. It shows that cheerleading occupies a provocative and liminal cultural status in so far as it has been both stripped yet also hyper-invested with meaning via a range of fetishistic logics. The news media’s obsession (and fetishistic disavowals of its obsession) with cheerleaders reveals the oppressive and disempowering ramifications of contemporary cultural responses to young women whose sexualities are both coveted and despised. It also shows that the critical discourse generated by groups traditionally associated with female oppression and that generated by many feminists can intersect in an ideological pincer movement which leaves young women associated with activities such as cheerleading sidelined and largely without allies.

INTRODUCTION: BOILING CHEERLEADERS ALIVE

Marty Beckerman is an American humour writer whose all-encompassing contempt for the mass mediated feminised spectacle of cheerleading has become a lynchpin of his career. He was once fired from a newspaper for asking a 13-year-old female cheerleader how it felt to be “a urine stain on the toilet seat of America” (cited in Traister, 2002). He is also the author of a collection of journalistic non-fiction called Death to all Cheerleaders in which he dismisses cheerleaders as a “race of loose bimbos with the brain capacity of squirrel faeces” (2000, p. 43). “If a daughter of mine wanted to be a cheerleader I would boil her alive,” he told a UK newspaper. “But not ‘till
I killed her, just until I killed her dreams” (cited in Wells, 2006). While Beckerman’s comments are extreme examples of the vitriol frequently directed at cheerleaders, thematically they share many similarities with mainstream discourse generated by a range of ostensibly disparate social groups including feminists, social conservatives, cultural elites, sports administrators and fans, mainstream media commentators and members of the general public. This rhetoric commonly frames cheerleaders as any combination of frivolous, talentless, inane, vain, trashy, promiscuous, exhibitionist, overly commodified agents of Americanisation and disruptive to key feminist, sporting and religious ideals. Complicating these negative framings is the fact that cheerleaders are simultaneously sexually fetishised in pornography, pop culture and the news media. That a relatively unremarkable feminine athletic endeavour provokes such intense cultural anxiety and sexual obsession makes cheerleading a singularly revealing object of study.

This article will explore the usefulness of academic work on antifandom, scapegoating and anti-Americanism beneath an overarching analytical umbrella of fetish theory in making sense of the ambivalence, obsession, contradiction, sexualisation and disavowal so often associated with cheerleading. Fetish theory helps explain the complex relationship between the media’s obsessive fixation with cheerleaders and its repeated, strident claims that cheerleading is meaningless and unworthy of attention. This article applies a layered and historically promiscuous understanding of fetish to show that cheerleading occupies a provocative and liminal cultural status in so far as it has been both stripped yet also hyper-invested with meaning via a range of fetishistic logics. This fetishisation occurs, most obviously, within the realms of pornography and pop culture. But it is the news media’s obsession (and fetishistic disavowals of its obsession) with cheerleaders that reveals most about the oppressive and disempowering ramifications of contemporary cultural responses to young women whose sexualities are both coveted and despised. This includes the use of anti-cheerleading rhetoric to insinuate that cheerleaders may be partly to blame when they are the victims of mishaps and violent crime. The fetishistic tendencies apparent in the textual vitriol directed towards cheerleaders will also be unpacked to shed new light on the nature and consequence of the darker elements of antifandom (Gray, 2003; 2005).

**History and Distinctions**

Cheerleading began in the elite domain of US college sports in the mid- to late 1800s when “charismatic, highly visible” students known as “rooter kings” or “yell masters” (Hanson, 1995, p.11) began leading spectators in boisterous, military-style cheers on the sides of football fields. Since then, it has undergone momentous transformations in its structure, style and content, as well as in the socio-economic status, race and gender of its participants. The two most dramatic and significant historical changes have involved cheerleading’s metamorphosis from an elite and exclusively masculine practice, and its split, in the 1990s, into professional dance-orientated and competitive athletic streams. While cheerleading’s original raison d’être was to provide “emotional support to an athletic team during competition” (ibid, p. 120), both competitive and professional cheerleaders now occupy increasingly autonomous roles: professional cheerleaders as stand-alone dance entertainers who appear independently in a range of contexts as well as on the sidelines of sporting events, and competitive cheerleaders as unallied athletes who face off at cheerleading competitions. Contrary to the common framing of cheerleaders as talentless in media discourse, competitive cheerleading is an elite athletic activity involving high-level tumbling, stunting, and gymnastics. Advocates are also lobbying – so far unsuccessfully – for its inclusion as a medial-sport in future Olympic Games (Oakes, 2009). In contrast to the stagnating participation rates of pursuits such as football and basketball, cheerleading currently stands as one of America’s fastest growing sports, with the number of US cheerleaders reaching 4 million in 2007 and the US spirit industry doubling in value between 2003
and 2008 to become a $2 billion empire (Torgovnick, 2008a, p. xiv). After a listless start as a cultural export, competitive cheerleading programs now exist in at least 60 countries (“International Cheer Union”) and there is a growing interest in subversive cheerleading practices such as gay and lesbian squads, radical activist squads, and senior citizen squads (Adams & Bettis, 2003, p. 4, 27-28). Ignorance and/or confusion relating to the distinctions involved in contemporary cheerleading practice mean the term usually appears in media and popular discourse as an amorphous, collapsible catch-all. This contributes to cheerleading’s location on a provocative cultural faultline (Lumby, 1997, p. 95) and participants’ liminal status between sex workers and athletes. Unless stated otherwise, this article uses the terms “cheerleader” and “cheerleading” to refer to female practitioners of all manifestations of the sport. While this risks replicating the distinction-related issues arising from other framings of cheerleading, it is necessary because the focus of this analysis concerns media discourse and cultural representations of cheerleading rather than the putative activity.

Fetish and the Sum of Cheerleading Parts

My research has involved the textual analysis of approximately 1000 cheerleading texts in Anglophone media over a three-year period. Frequently framed as universal objects of male desire, the representation of cheerleaders is an extraordinarily popular theme in heterosexual Western pornography, and also saturates popular culture and the mainstream media. Up until the early 21st century, it was rare to find news media texts that reported on cheerleading in the straightforward, fact-orientated style characterising the bulk of media reporting of other sports. There has been a marked increase in the number of quotidian sports stories on cheerleading in the news media since the international boom in competitive cheerleading following the 2000 release of the feature film Bring It On. That said, a large proportion of contemporary cheerleading-themed news media texts still involves coverage which is not sports-orientated in nature. These relate to topics such as: sex scandals; crimes; entertainment-orientated taxonomies; debates; and accidents and injuries that are associated with external events such as car crashes rather than cheerleading practice. Media coverage of cheerleading-related sex scandals (as opposed to sex crimes) became common after the rise of professional cheerleading in the US in the 1970s. In 1979, the Dallas Cowboys Cheerleaders successfully stopped a New York theatre from screening Debbie Does Dallas (Farmany, 1988) after a judge agreed there could be confusion between the squad and what he described as a “gross and revolting sex film” (Miller, 2002, p. 152). In the same year, two Denver Pony Express cheerleaders were dismissed for appearing in Playboy (Hanson 1995, p. 54). More recent cheerleading-related sex scandals involve the disciplining of cheerleaders – often via expulsion from educational institutional or squads – after the posting of semi-nude, nude or sexually suggestive photographs on the internet. Other sex-related scandals have involved varsity and professional cheerleaders – as well as cheerleading coaches – caught posing for pornographic magazines or appearing in pornographic films, sometimes in their official cheerleading uniforms.

While the dearth of quotidian sports coverage of cheerleading in the mainstream news media conforms with content analysis showing women’s sport “to be grossly underrepresented in the media” (Rowe, 1995, p. 134), the glut of other types of cheerleading-related material suggests that the media’s relationship with cheerleading is one of fetishistic fixation in addition to neglect.

The etymological, historical and cultural roots of the term “fetish” spans religious, anthropological, economic, psycho-sexual and popular contexts and is well-suited as a theoretical lens and tool for explicating the media’s complex and conflicting relationship with cheerleaders. A commonly quoted definition of fetish in the religious sense comes from English anthropologist - 54 -
Edward Burnett Tylor who, in 1871, wrote that a fetish object “is treated as having personal consciousness and power, is talked with, worshipped, prayed to, sacrificed to, petted or ill-treated with references to its past or present behavior to its votaries” (cited in Budge, 1988, p. 57). Media discourse often frames cheerleaders as embodying the spirit of modern “evils” such as commercialism, Americanism, sexualisation, spectacle and exhibitionism. Additionally, cheerleaders are the subject – either literally or metaphorically – of worship and petting as well as sacrifice and ill-treatment, and – again consistent with Tylor’s love/hate thematic – the cult of cheerleading includes votaries of the activity as well as votaries of its castigation. In this sense, cheerleading also displays the characteristics of a taboo as described by Edmund Leach in structural anthropology (1962) in that – as Australian media studies scholar John Hartley puts it in relation to juvenation in the news media – it “attracts compulsive attention, simultaneous attraction and repulsion, alternate over-valuation and under-valuation, ritualization and denial, and (compulsively repeated) responses ranging from sacralization to attempted extirpation: ‘revelling’ to ‘scandalizing’ …” (1998).

In 1867, Karl Marx drew parallels with the mystical thinking of the “mist-enveloped regions of the religious world” when he used “commodity fetishism” to describe industrial capitalism’s divorcing of (and subsequent forgetting of the divorcing of) human contributions from the value-form of commodities (1867). This, he argued, rendered the latter as “queer” things “abounding in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties”:

so soon as [a table] steps forth as a commodity, it is changed into something transcendent… and evolves out of its wooden brain grotesque ideas, far more wonderful than “table-turning” ever was (ibid).

Commodity fetishism involves – at the most pessimistic reading – a deliberately exploitative and manipulative enshrouding and/or more sanguinely – an involuntary forgetting or overlooking. Either way, the result is that the relationship between workers and the products of their labour remains “merely a relationship between things” while the real social relationships of production are concealed (Fine & Saad-Filho, 2004, pp. 25-26). This type of alienation is frequently said to be evident in the commodification and objectification of women and their sexual value to men, and is also evident in the packaging and selling of cheerleaders. Marx’s notion of commodity fetishism is equally germane to one of the central arguments of this article: that women athletes are changed into queer, social hieroglyphics as soon as they step forth as cheerleaders.

Reduced to the sum of their parts, competitive female cheerleaders seem unremarkable in sporting contexts. Their uniforms are not unlike those worn in relatively controversy-free sports such as Australian netball and are often more substantial than those worn by competitors of either genders in triathlons, while the routines they perform and the athletic skills they require bear many similarities to those of Olympic gymnasts. Professional sideline cheerleaders, parsed to their aesthetic and athletic ones and zeros, seem similarly commonplace. Their apparel, dance steps and conspicuous smiles mirror those of countless musical choruslines. Yet the heat and nature of the discursive ejaculations accompanying both competitive and professional cheerleaders suggests that cheerleading wholes transcend the sum of cheerleading parts in ways which are regarded by consumers of cheerleading and cheerleading-related discourse as both wonderful and grotesque. In the context of cheerleading fetishes, therefore, French cultural theorist Jean Baudrillard’s “magical thinking” can be framed as involving a forgetting, overlooking or ignorance (willful or otherwise) of the ordinariness of the individual elements which together constitute the activity of cheerleading. This magical – or at the very least idiosyncratic – thinking endows cheerleaders and cheerleading with significant cultural
potency but also subsumes the human elements extant in the fetishised subject. As American anthropologist David Graeber writes in relation to fetish:

We create things, and then, because we don’t understand how we did it, we end up treating our own creations as if they had power over us. We fall down and worship that which we ourselves have made (2007, p. 117).

The term fetish was popularised in a psycho-sexual context in the late 1880s by Richard von Krafft-Ebing, the sexologist who, “termed it a pathology, a deviant sexual practice, and a perversion” that involved erotic attachments to and sexual gratification from objects rather than people (Wray, 1998). In the early 20th century, Sigmund Freud used the word in the context of his Oedipal complex, in which a boy fears his mother’s lack of a penis is a result of castration and that his subsequent fears are so overwhelming that “the prerational consciousness ‘disavows’ the sight of female genitals… believing instead that Mother really does have a penis” (Pietz, p. 314). In adolescence, a fetish object may become “a symbolic substitute displacing the disavowed mother’s penis that the fetishist knows does not exist but… believes in nonetheless” (ibid). As with commodity fetishism, both thaumaturgic thought and forgetfulness are involved in fetishisation in the psycho-sexual sense. American cultural and social theorist Matt Wray notes that the Freudian fetish involves a kind of “creative denial… that helps the fetishist ward off anxiety and restore a sense of well-being, all the while producing a kind of amnesia” (1998). Fetish, in this sense, is useful when framing discursive interest in cheerleading because of these objectifications, depersonalisations and object substitutions.

References to fetish in contemporary popular discourse are used playfully to signify “any thing or activity to which one is irrationally devoted” (‘Fetish’) or “an obsession or fixation, usually expressed in ritualistic behaviour” (Macquarie Concise Dictionary, p. 409). Contemporary popular and academic discourse often collapses some or all of the definitions from the term’s etymological, historical and cultural history, invoking images of salaciousness, alienation, reification, supernatural powers, pathologisation, manipulation, and/or a sense that the focus of a fetish may not deliver its promised bliss and is not to be trusted. There is a suggestion that those in the grip of a fetish have an unjustified and irrational fixation or preoccupation, and blindness to an object or subject’s “real” nature. It is this resonant, palimpsestic definition of fetish that underpins my use of the term in this essay.

**SHOWING THE UNSHOWABLE**

An overall media tendency to vilify cheerleading often involves framing cheerleaders as culpable in relation to scandal or misadventure even if their involvement in these incidents is marginal or their role could reasonably be viewed as “innocent”. This occurs via a number of media practices ranging from insinuation to outright editorial declaration, and is ethically problematic, particularly where it apportions blame to women who are the victims of sex and/or violent crime. In such cases, culpability is often implied via textual proximity and the referencing of negative cheerleading stereotypes to connect cheerleading and undesirable outcomes. An example is a 2002 newspaper article about the strangulation of a 13-year-old described as a “promiscuous internet Lolita” (Johnston, 2002). The victim’s cheerleader status is included in the first paragraph which may imply that it is linked to (or possibly even responsible for) both her promiscuous behaviour and her death. This case is typical of media coverage of murder cases in which victims’ status as cheerleaders or former cheerleaders is routinely privileged over other facts which could reasonably be viewed as being more pertinent.

A possible reading of these texts is that cheerleaders have a potent, perhaps irresistible, appeal which may incite others to sexually-motivated violence and serve as a mitigating factor
in criminal defence. The suggestion that cheerleaders may be partly or wholly to blame for attacks against them and/or that men cannot reasonably be expected to behave decorously (or legally) in their presence is articulated more flagrantly in the readers’ comment sections accompanying on-line news media reports about such incidents. Beneath a 2009 piece about a cheerleading coach arrested for having sexual contact with minors, for instance, several readers direct rage toward whichever “idiot” was responsible for putting a 23-year-old man in charge of a group of school cheerleaders in the first place, suggesting this person should be arrested, too (caringmsnurse commenting on Lovelady, 2009; CelticLady9 commenting on Lovelady, 2009). The implication is that a man can not be expected to control himself under such circumstances.

The gratuitous use of cheerleading as a descriptor for protagonists in news media reports combined with the force of pre-existing negative cheerleading stereotypes may also produce implications of blame. In 2008, a Florida high school student died from a rare genetic disorder triggered by certain anesthetics after undergoing surgery to correct a birth defect and augment her breasts. “Florida High School Varsity Cheerleader Dies after Breast Implant Surgery” (2008) and “High School Cheerleader Dies of Breast Surgery Complications” (Donaldson-Evans, 2008) were typical of the headlines associated with news coverage of this incident. Given that vanity and conceit is a common negative stereotype associated with female cheerleaders (Hanson, 1995, p. 104), one reasonable reading of these media constructions is that cheerleading-related narcissism may have held some responsibility for the death. Imputations of culpability extend, more broadly, to the practice of cheerleading itself which is frequently framed as a powerful force which can exert an adverse influence on individuals and may therefore be partly or wholly to blame for misadventure which occurs (or which can be constructed semiotically as occurring) near it.

The news media practice of castigating cheerleaders as generically blameworthy without acknowledging its own role in the creation and/or amplification of this guilt exemplifies a broader issue of news media disavowal in relation to cheerleading. As discussed, disavowal in the Freudian fetishistic sense refers to a boy both seeing and not seeing his mother’s “missing penis”: he “‘knows’ what he has seen (female genitals), but denies it, focusing on his new fetish/ replacement penis, and convincing himself that he “‘doesn’t know’” (Albury, 2002, p. 50). In addition to seeing but not seeing its role in the constitution of cheerleading culpability, news media disavowal and denial is evident in terms of its editorial dismissal of cheerleading’s worth, relevance and/or interest value while simultaneously producing large volumes of discourse focusing on the activity. It is also common for news media reports to question or criticise the “glamour quotient”

cheerleading adds to sport without acknowledging that – by accompanying these and other cheerleading-related texts with images of the offending performers and deeds – cheerleading also adds a glamour quotient to the news media. Complaining about cheerleading while showing visuals of the very thing being denounced fits well with the Freudian notion of fetishism as disavowal. An example is a story by an on-line Australian sports columnist who calls for an end to cheerleading and complains that even media critiques of cheerleaders are used as an excuse to run sexy, objectified photographs of cheerleaders (Musolino, 2009). His piece is accompanied by a photograph of a sexy, unnamed cheerleader. This irony was not lost on readers, with one posting that she or he “only clicked on this story because of the picture attached to it” (WA, commenting on ibid). Such practices may also be connected with a more general media disavowal and “visceral suspicion” of visual beauty, especially the kind associated with the female human form (Hartley & Rennie, 2004, p. 459). The publication of sexualised photographs of cheerleaders alongside media narratives railing against the sexualisation of cheerleaders also illustrates what Hartley and Lumby describe as “the relationship between the
desire to watch and to watch over” (2003, p. 54). As Hartley puts it:

Often the news media deal with the tension between their own propensity to communicate via sexualized young people, and their own tendencies to police young people’s sexuality (and therefore everyone else’s), by having their cake and eating it; showing the pictures (communicatively, democratically) while wagging their fingers (truth-seekingly, governmentally) (1998).

The proliferation of texts expressing surprise that cheerleading is more difficult or impressive than an author or author’s interviewees previously believed also exemplifies news media disavowal because, while ostensibly championing cheerleading, the positioning and privileging of negative stereotypes is likely to contribute to the continued existence and potency of these stereotypes. Texts constructed in this manner occur so routinely that the approach could almost be classed as a template for “positive” coverage of cheerleading in the news media. Consider a Scottish newspaper report stating that its goal is to correct inaccurate cheerleading stereotypes yet which marvels at the absence of “pom-poms, cheesy grins or mini-skirts” (Diamond, 2009), as well as the opening lines of a New Zealand news story about a local squad competing in an international competition:

When most people think of cheerleading, they think of pompoms, short skirts and over-excited girls squealing and shouting as the blokes play footy. But as it turns out… [c]heerleading is gruelling, hard work and a sport in its own right… (“Cheerleading – it’s not just pompoms and squealing girls”, 2009).

Supposedly promoting a positive view of cheerleaders, these texts clearly situate negative stereotypes as the dominant norm. As a result, it is feasible that any reader who did not previously associate cheerleading with pom-poms, short skirts and over-excited girls squealing may do so after accessing these stories. This effect can be better understood by considering theories of psychological reactance, and the paradoxical consequences of “thought suppression” in which telling someone not to think of a subject is believed to produce “the very obsession or preoccupation that it is directed against” (Wegner et al, 1987, p. 5). As such, an American journalist’s plea for readers to, “Forget the American archetype of blond cheerleader in tight sweater pining for the muscled quarterback” (Brady, 2002), is likely to be counterproductive. It is also possible that outwardly packaging a text as pro-cheerleading may permit mainstream journalists to be more acerbic than they would be if a story was blatantly anti-cheerleading and therefore required more justification and evidence to support editorial criticism.

**Loving to Hate**

The final section of this article is devoted to an exploration of the fetishistic nature of the rhetorical vitriol directed towards cheerleaders and the potential pleasure taken from readers or viewers who experience the fascination/aversion encoded in this discourse. A significant proportion of media discourse framing cheerleading involves criticism ranging from passing put-downs and sober critiques, to what could be classed as antilocution or hate speech[^10]. While Beckerman’s writing sits within the genre of hyperbolic “shock” humour (Traister, 2002), his anti-cheerleader rhetoric contain levels of vitriol and aggression which are unusual even for his creative genre, and which break a number of taboos regarding the expression of sexual interest and aggression towards school-aged children. His return, again and again, to extravagant damnations of cheerleaders is emblematic of the obsessive discourse generated by many of cheerleading’s detractors. As Indian journalist Gitanjali Sharma writes of the controversies about cheerleading at Indian cricket matches:

The so-called guardians of Indian culture... continue to carry images of
cheerleaders long after they perform at stadiums. They have carried them in their minds, preserved them, dwelt on them, obsessed about them, exaggerated them, magnified them and finally blown them out of proportion just about everywhere... (2008).

The most extreme examples of anti-cheerleading discourse are usually (but not always) located on-line in non-mainstream sites, blogs and readers’ comments sections, and are undoubtedly influenced by the broader trend of “cyber-disinhibition” (Rosenbaum, 2007). That said, there are significant similarities between unchecked cyber censure targetting cheerleaders and mainstream media criticism. These similarities are both thematic and energetic – in that the nature of the discourse suggests many of these critics gain pleasure from publically expressing their objections to cheerleading, to the point where their interest in this activity can be interpreted as fetishistic. In addition to the experiencing of personal pleasure, vitriol directed at cheerleaders serves a number of other psychological, social and cultural purposes which can be interrogated with reference to academic work relating to antifandom and scapegoating, in combination with this essay’s overarching employment of fetish theory. Academic work on anti-Americanism is also instructive because cheerleading is widely regarded as being quintessentially American and as epitomising many of the qualities and phenomena outsiders find problematic about the US.

Media texts often frame cheerleading as being both ridiculous and threatening, and tend to be all-encompassing and essentialist in nature. “Cheerleading seems to produce a social toxin that poisons the brain of anyone it touches – the girls, their parents, teachers, administrators and the public,” one American newspaper columnist writes in a piece arguing that the sport should be abandoned entirely (Parks, 2007). Such texts are rarely evidenced or even reality-based critiques but are antonymous and indicative of a “blank bias” (O’Brien, cited in Markovits, 1997, p. viii). It is also common for anti-cheerleading discourse to involve the “sudden inruptions of prejudice into irrelevant contexts” which American psychologist Gordon Allport uses as a measure of the intensity and salience of a hostile attitude (2000, p. 40). An examination of media discourse suggests that cheerleading has become a code word for a range of ills associated with contemporary – and particularly American contemporary – culture. The widespread discursive agreement on the objectionable nature of cheerleaders also shares similarities with US-based academic Andrei S. Markovits’ framing of anti-American discourse as a lingua franca – a “sort of global antinomy, a mutually shared language of opposition to and resistance against the real and perceived ills of modernity” (2007, pp. 27, 1). Cheerleading in this sense is a tangible object of contempt that – fetishistically – stands in for less tangible fears such as those relating to raunch-, youth-, and trash-culture. As such, criticisms of the activity are likely to “reveal more about the individual or group passing judgment” (O’Connor, 2004, p. 89) than they do about the object of hatred. Rather than attempting to determine whether cheerleaders “deserve” the criticism they receive, therefore, it is far more instructive to examine the possible motivations of – and consequent benefits which may accrue to – critics both on a micro and macro level.

Reviling cheerleaders is likely to serve a number of psychological functions for individuals including the “pleasant catharsis” of speaking one’s mind (Allport, 2000, p. 40) and/or the self affirmation that can be obtained through derogating others (Fein & Spencer, 2000). In a study of audience responses to Martha Stewart media texts, US communications scholar Melissa A. Click notes that while some regular viewers and readers watch Martha Stewart Living to relax and escape, others report “amusement, irritation, or anger when watching the show” (2007, p. 310). Critics of cheerleading are likely to experience similar emotions, though I wish to nuance Click’s findings by arguing that while viewers may not use words such as relaxation and escapism when referring to the deliberate consumption of texts they dislike, these may
still be appropriate terms to describe their experiences. Criticising cheerleaders may also offer a form of gratifying revenge for negative personal experiences associated with cheerleading in high school which Adams and Bettis note remain potent and influential memories for many adult Americans (2003, p. 7). While cheerleading’s cultural status is liminal, contradictory and contested, its huge presence in terms of numbers of practitioners and mediated representations mean that it is far from a subaltern subculture. Some deprecation of cheerleaders, therefore, may relate to the taste distinctions theorised by French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1984) and be part of a broader backlash to cultural products enjoying mass popularity. Looked at in this light, the popularity of cheerleading may not mitigate, so much as provoke discourses of ridicule and contempt. The positive stereotype of cheerleaders as wholesome, peppy, perky and popular (Hanson, 1995, p. 6) may also endow detractors with a degree of subcultural capital (McRobbie & Thornton, 1996) and fit into a broader 1980s and 1990s backlash against what is referred to in popular discourse as “political correctness”. That said, criticising cheerleaders may also offer those who do not wish to be framed as politically incorrect a loophole when negotiating current norms on what is and is not “acceptable” to say about young women and, to a lesser extent, children and the working class. So long as a denunciation is framed as being first and foremost about cheerleading (even if cheerleading looks very much like a proxy for other concerns), these critics are likely to receive a metaphorical “get out of jail free” card.

How then, to explain the existence of a mediasphere which permits the vilification of cheerleaders – often as a stand-in for girls and young women – with impunity? One explanation is that feminists, the usual gatekeepers for mediated misogyny, actually generate a substantial sub-section of anti-cheerleader vitriol. Cheerleading’s popularity and cultural power also makes it possible to rationalise and package anti-cheerleader rhetoric as harmless, justified, and possibly even courageous and righteous. As Markovits writes in relation to European anti-Americanism, by directing prejudice at “a Mr Big, and a seemingly retrograde and evil one at that” citizens who have “rightly dislodged many… previously held prejudices from acceptable public interaction” can indulge in prejudice not only guilt-free but convinced that they are acting “morally, justly, and virtuously” (1997, pp. 221-2). According to O’Brien, what makes anti-Americanism (and, I would add, anti-cheerleaderism) distinctive as well as different from other prejudices, is the question of power:

Whereas discrimination against peoples considered weak and helpless is viewed as abhorrent behavior, this isn’t. Anti-Americanism is regarded as a form of fighting back. It’s battling against an eight-hundred-pound gorilla which… [is] “threatening, powerful, clumsy, yet also inferior” (cited ibid, p. viii).

The relationship between vitriol and the perceived power of an object of hatred is also addressed by UK media researcher Vivi Theodoropoulou who argues that “it is a series of emotions such as fear, admiration, respect, and envy for the opposing threat that cause hatred” (2007, p. 316). She references the ancient Greek term Antipalon deos which has come to express “the mutual fear between opponents, enemies, or adversaries that ensures unity and cohesion in the interior of the rival camps, and a state of balance between them” (ibid, p. 318). Feminism’s complicit and participatory role in cheerleader vilification as well as the “Mr (Ms?) Big” dynamic outlined above are particularly relevant when considering anti-cheerleading vitriol generated by mainstream media outlets where there are both institutional and tacit rules influencing what can be said about whom in which way. It is hard to imagine Beckerman’s thoughts on school girl cheerleaders being regarded as humorous or even tolerable if they had been directed towards school girl track and field athletes or basketballers. As with anti-American rhetoric, cheerleading offers an excuse for “public expressions of humiliation” that are rarely acceptable elsewhere (Markovits, 2007, p. 15). Cheerleading crimes and scandals also offer an opportunity
for villificatory and misogynist discourse (likely to be deemed socially offensive in other contexts) to be framed as a reasonable chastising of a dangerous wrong-doer. This is problematic because the justificatory “evidence” offered – if any evidence is offered at all – is likely to be influenced by the aforementioned tendency for media discourse to frame cheerleaders as being overly or unfairly culpable when they are involved – or can be framed as being involved – in scandals and crimes. In relation to the Martha Stewart corporate fraud case, US communications scholar Carol A. Stabile argues that the disproportionate levels and triumphalist tone of the media attention devoted to Stewart’s downfall exposed “the deep vein of misogyny that continues to exist in the US culture industry” (2004). It seems likely that the coverage of and mediated reaction to cheerleading-related scandals and crimes is similar.

**Ambivalence, Antifandom and Hateship with Benefits**

Ambivalence is a frequent feature of mediated vitriol directed at cheerleaders and is better understood by considering academic work addressing the complexities and paradoxes of the intense relationships between love and hate. UK cultural studies scholar Sara Ahmed, for instance, writes of the way hate generates its object “as defence against injury’, noting that “it is a common theme within so-called hate groups to declare themselves as organisations of love” (2004, p. 42). This holds true with anti-cheerleading rhetoric generated by groups such as feminists, moral conservatives and sports fans who frame their dislike of cheerleading as a part of a protective love of other things (for example, feminine liberation, youthful morality and sporting purity) that they see as being under threat and perhaps even hated by those who promote, practice, or even merely tolerate cheerleading. One of the popular understandings of the love/hate axis is that these two emotions exist side by side in a paradoxical marriage of mutual opposition to each other yet parallel focus in terms of subject. Much cheerleading-directed vitriol, however, suggests that the act of hating can itself be an intensely pleasurable and psychologically affirming activity, and may be actively pursued for these benefits. As UK cultural studies scholar Jonathan Gray notes in relation to the activities of antifans, some audience members may deliberately expose themselves to texts they dislike “precisely to raise their blood pressure” (2005, p. 853). Much of the “love” that exists in the context of anti-cheerleading vitriol, therefore, does not relate to cheerleaders or cheerleading but to the pleasures gained from hating them. This is distinct to other, popular understandings of love/hate responses in which someone may love some aspects of cheerleading yet hate others.

The love/hate nature of much mediated vitriol directed at cheerleaders is caused by and is also constitutive of cheerleading’s sexual and cultural liminality. Beckerman, for example, is highly dismissive and derisive of the high school cheerleaders he interviews, yet still expresses an interest in having sex with them (2000, p. 43). Such articulations of both desire and contempt for cheerleaders may be because their detractors find them sexually desirable yet view them as possessing either: (a) a surplus of sexual availability (thereby making them worthy of contempt because they are seen as “sluts”); or (b) a deficit of sexual availability in that they are seen as unavailable to anyone except the most elite, alpha males (thereby making contempt a more psychologically tolerable reaction than feelings of rejection-related inadequacy). Either way, the sexualised female cheerleading subject can’t win. Relevant, here, are Ahmed’s conclusions on the intimacy and intensity involved in hating when she notes that hate involves an excessive need and is opposed to indifference rather than love:

Certainly, within psychological theories of prejudice, hate is seen as tied up with love. Or, to put it more precisely, love is understood as the pre-condition of hate... There can, in fact, be no hatred until there has been long-continued frustration and disappointment... As Mikkel Borch-Jacobson puts it, “Hate wants to get its
hands on the other; it wants to touch even when it wants to destroy”… (2004, pp. 50, 51).

Another explanation for ambivalent sexual responses relates to conflicting representations of cheerleading as both a wholesome activity for prepubescent children as well as a highly sexualised performance by and for sexually available adults. This could render desire for cheerleaders psychologically confusing as it raises pedophilic and hebephilic taboos. Mixed message vitriol is also likely to be generated by critics of cheerleading who experience a sexual desire for cheerleaders yet have contempt for the activity, which means they could be expressing a displaced contempt for their own predilections.

In a more general sense, the paradoxical pleasures gained from actively hating cheerleading texts can be better fathomed by considering theories relating to antifandom – a term pioneered by Gray to describe the practice of activelydisliking genres, texts, or personalities (2003; 2005). He makes the case that:

hate or dislike of a text can be just as powerful as can a strong and admiring, affective relationship with a text, and they can produce just as much activity, identification, meaning, and “effects” or serve just as powerfully to unite and sustain a community or subculture (2005, p. 841).

In relation to the textual reception continuum, Gray proposes that pleasure and displeasure responses be positioned not on opposite ends of a spectrum, but on a Möbius strip, with the behaviours and performances of textual lovers and loathers “resembling, if not replicating, each other” (2005, p. 845). Fans of cheerleading texts (be they fans of mediated discourse or actual acts of cheerleading) are not restricted to the common understanding of this term, but also include Gray’s antifans – committed textual consumers who claim to dislike or even detest cheerleaders. Publically loathing texts can be creative and performative to the point where antifans may consciously or subconsciously compete to produce the most original, humorous or politically incorrect anti-cheerleading response. Gray notes that some antifans expose themselves to texts they dislike as “an intellectual-rational challenge” that allows access to “intellectual, comic, and cultural capital” via the engagement of “witty and analytical textual deconstruction” (2005, p. 853). Some expressions of cheerleading-related antifandom involve what can be best described as engaged enragement. Others are less informed – or at least informed by an active avoidance. On an internet forum dedicated to expressions of hatred for films, a contributor states that they refuse to watch any cheerleading movies. “EWWWWWWWW!” this post reads, “I HATE THOSE!” (Amplify commenting on “What movie do you refuse to watch?”). Given that this poster refuses to watch cheerleading movies, it begs the question of how they know they hate them. Gray, however, argues that it would be rash to dismiss such comments because even un-read texts clearly have meaning and relevance to antifan audiences in that they inspire and require “the language of physical repulsion” (2005, p. 848). His conclusion is that in cases such as these, the moral rather than the aesthetic “or even the rational-realistic” text has been read and responded to (ibid) – a conceptual framing which fits with the generic, non-specific nature of much anti-cheerleading vitriol.

In addition to the individual benefits gained by those who experience and express vitriol towards cheerleading, there are benefits which relate to aggregations. The “in-group” cohesion offered by the collective rejection of an “out-group” (Allport, 2000) is a concept which has been explored at length in a diverse range of fields including psychology, philosophy, sociology, and political, cultural and media studies. A sociological take of the role of the “other” can be found in the work of UK academic Kathryn Woodward who writes of the process of identities forming in relation to “what they are not” (1997, p. 35). Political scholars such as Barry Rubin and Judith
Colp Rubin note the transfer of “psychological insecurity” into hostility directed outwards (2004, p. 22). In the field of media studies, Hartley’s case is that news is organised around strategies of inclusion and exclusion which create the domains of “wedom and theydom” and permit an insidious rather than “open, offensive prejudice” against those who are “unlike us” and therefore “like each other” (1992, pp. 206-9). This is particularly relevant when considering the proliferation of media representations in which cheerleaders appear unnamed or headless in visuals, framed both literally and metaphorically as being part of an indistinguishable mass of “others”. Explorations of the generic communal benefits of public disapprobation – particularly in response to issues of crime and deviance – can also be found in moral panic theory. In a discussion of “the age of the moral panic”, UK sociologist Kenneth Thompson refers to French sociologist Émile Durkheim’s argument that public indignation about social deviance is functionally beneficial for recreating social unity (1988, pp. 2, 23). This, he notes, is similar to Marx’s view that the criminal “renders a ‘service’ by arousing the moral and aesthetic feelings of the public” (cited ibid, p. 23). The theories of French philosopher René Girard also offer valuable insights into the social cohesion gained when adversaries form a “de facto allegiance against a common enemy” (2003, p. 26) in the form of a scapegoat, particularly if this occurs when extant cultural orders are on shifting or uncertain ground. Of Girard’s work, Australian academic Chris Fleming refers to the way “the tension and unrest bedeviling a community is purged, temporarily at least, by inflicting the violent rage of a mob on a victim or group of victims” (2004, p. 48). While it is rare for literal violence to be directed towards cheerleaders, textual aggression is still likely to serve a Girardian function in terms of its unifying and affirming effect among, in particular, feminist groups and moral conservatives (though on an intra rather than inter group level). It is worth noting Hartley’s identification of a post Cold War, post-postmodernist political splintering, which has stripped the political left in particular of a sense of shared opposition, making a search for new “enemies” a priority (1992, p. 15). Cheerleaders may provide a reassuring sense of threat in this regard, particularly given the widespread agreement about their objectionable nature: condemning them is something the entire family (in a sociological sense) can enjoy and bond over.

The content, production and function of cheerleader-directed vitriol contains a number of fetishistic elements relating to, among other things, surrogates overloaded with meaning, psychological displacements and creative disavowals of intent. Also relevant in a fetishistic sense is the lack of differentiation between individual cheerleaders and all cheerleaders, and the forgetting or ignoring that an entire sporting group is frequently blamed (usually via gendered logics) for isolated, often manufactured or exaggerated incidents. Additionally, the tolerance and/or expressing of vitriol by groups and institutions which, in other contexts, would be likely to censure (or censor) such discourse, facilitates the opportunistic and fetishistic use of cheerleading subjects as an excuse for misogyny. The commodification of cheerleaders which occurs via the economic exchange of cultural artifacts and texts hosting cheerleader-directed vitriol can be framed as fetishistic in the alienation-related, Marxist sense because cheerleader-targetted vitriol is rarely concerned with the lived realities of cheerleading practice\textsuperscript{13}, but is circulated and traded to supply a complex set of demands relating to individual, group and social psychologies – as well as to accrue various capitals. (In addition to the literal sale of books such as Beckerman’s, such discourses have the potential to metaphorically “sell” feminist, moral conservative and sports-related ideologies.) Also relevant when considering the psychological displacement involved in the fetishistic articulation of loathing towards cheerleaders is Ahmed’s case that, rather than residing in a given subject or object, hate is economic, circulating between signifiers in relationships of difference and displacement. Such feelings become fetishes – “qualities that seem to reside in objects” – when the history of their production and circulation has been erased (2004, p. 11). This holds true for cheerleader-
directed vitriol because, while cheerleaders are framed as being intrinsically deserving of hate, understandings of cheerleaders as unworthy are heavily reliant on mediated, self-serving constructions. As such, cheerleaders can be viewed not so much as the cause of others’ vitriol, but as convenient vessels and mediums for this emotion. Fetishistic forces can also be identified in the selection and persecution of cheerleaders as scapegoats. Fleming notes, for instance, that effective Girardian scapegoats often hold an ambiguous or liminal social status in which they are both marginal and internal to a community: rather than being seen as victims, they are instead invariably viewed “as victimizers par excellence” (2004, p. 50). This is achieved, in part, via the misrepresentation and exaggeration of scapegoats’ alleged crimes, with persecutors often attributing to their victims “remarkable – indeed, often supernatural – capacities that [imbue] their malevolence with extraordinary malignancy” (ibid). While the “supernatural” capacities of cheerleaders may be metaphorical rather than literal, the collective female cheerleader which emerges from accumulated discourses of vitriol is a figure of great power. She is responsible for every adolescent hurt and rejection; for the triumph of mass, trash culture; for the corruption of children; and the destruction of the purity and glory of sport. She is every bad thing a young woman has ever done and will ever do.

Conclusion

Erotic and economic, the female cheerleader has a potent symbolic charge which is both more and less than the sum of her parts. This paradox exists because cheerleading is the focus of fetishistic discursive activity which overloads and hyper-invests the feminised cheerleading subject with meaning yet also empties her out so that she becomes alienable and fungible – an economic, symbolic and ideological commodity. Cheerleaders appear in media discourse as signifiers for norms relating to the best and worst aspects of sexualised femininity. They are framed as embodying the heights of feminine decorum as well as, more frequently, the depths of feminine disrepute. As a result, themes and symbols of respectability vie with those of taboo, reflecting the unfixed, unstable and contested nature of idealised imaginings of contemporary femininity, as well as societal tensions between denial and desire. The contradictions evident in mediated representations of cheerleaders also occur in a meta sense. Dialectics of crisis (regarding the sexual, cultural, moral and ideological threats supposedly posed by cheerleading) and urgings of containment exist alongside an obsessive and fetishistic news media interest in cheerleading as a journalistic subject. As a result, texts advancing surveillance and suppression occur simultaneously with subtexts and actions suggestive of voyeurism and exposure. While the mediation of cheerleading clearly “does complex cultural work” in terms of gender and sexuality sense-making, a number of serious consequences are likely to flow from or at least be associated with the discursive paradigms framing cheerleading. Rather than entering the lengthy and well-documented debate over the consequences of sexual objectification, it should simply be noted that the relentless degree to which the cheerleader’s “sexual parts or sexual functions are separated out from the rest of her personality and reduced to the status of mere instruments or else regarded as if they were capable of representing her” may: have negative psychological consequences for individual cheerleaders; fuel negative perceptions (and ongoing negative media framings) of cheerleading as an activity; and contribute to a continuing tendency to objectify women overall. Vitriolic rhetoric focussed on cheerleading is also likely to:

(1) contribute to a disempowering reduction in the reputation of both cheerleaders individually and cheerleading overall;

(2) contribute to making cheerleading more physically dangerous by framing it as an activity unworthy of rigorous safety consideration and institutional support (institutional
weaknesses and disorganisation have been identified as key factors in cheerleading’s high injury rates [Muellan & Cantu, 2008, p. 44])19;

(3) provide a socially sanctioned outlet for discourses of vitriol (that would normally be considered socially unacceptable in mainstream media contexts) such as those associated with misogyny, classism and racism (in relation to dialogues of hate directed at America);

(4) lead to prejudicial action against and/or, at the very least, continued textual aggression towards cheerleaders. While there is no evidence of a direct, causal link between textual and physical aggression towards cheerleaders, cogent are Gray’s findings that the darker dimensions of antifandom such as pseudo “revenge” or punishment fantasies reveal an “e-lynch mob mentality” and a “dire need for a socialpsychological examination of textual hatred” (2005, p. 851). There are also strong indications that antilocution of such intensity “is almost certain to be backed up by discriminatory action” (Allport, 2000, p. 40).

As with European anti-Americanism in which “the US must be identified as the singular threat to democracy” for “stupidity and bloodshed to vanish from Europe” (Revel, 2003), cheerleading is frequently cast as the “monster scapegoat” (ibid) representing all that is wrong with feminised youth culture, mass culture and contemporary sport. This weakens potentially rational and justifiable critiques of cheerleading and the broader social ills it is alleged to represent, as well as encouraging the unfair and unrealistic notion that curtailing or killing off cheerleading would act as a sociocultural cure-all. It also crystallises the predicaments faced by “femininity and feminine bodies” (Urla & Swedland, 2008, p. 232) in an era in which the critical discourse generated by groups traditionally associated with female oppression and the critical discourse generated by many feminists are intersecting in an ideological pincer movement which leaves young women associated with activities such as cheerleading simultaneously hyper-eroticised and sidelined; and largely without allies.

ENDNOTES

1 While increasing numbers of men are returning to cheerleading practice (Adams & Bettis, 2003, p. 4.), examining the ramifications of this phenomenon lies beyond the scope of this article.

2 Quantitative measures of cheerleading-themed pornography are impossible to obtain, but Google searches do provide some useful insights. In May and June, 2009, I conducted a number of searches using the word “porn” combined with the words “cheerleader”, “cheerleaders” and/or “cheerleading” which yielded an average of 5 million results. This compared to a search for “porn” alone which yielded an average of 220 million results. While sportswomen of all persuasions are frequently “trivialized, infantilized and sexualized” (O’Reilly & Cahn, 2007, p. 266), my research suggests that cheerleading appears in hard-core heterosexual pornography far more frequently than other female sporting endeavours. This is supported by the work of Australian media academics Alan McKee, Katherine Albury and Catharine Lumby whose list of 50 bestselling X-rated videos and DVDs in Australia in 2003 includes two cheerleading-related titles (2008, p. 50). None of the other 48 films in this list involve women’s sport (McKee, 2009, pers. comm. 4 June).

3 Examples include lists addressing subjects such as superlative male cheerleaders (“Top

4 See: G, 2008; Marquis, 2009; et al.

5 In this context I am using “queer” not in the contemporary politicised sense but, as Marx does, to refer to something that is odd.

6 This is the term Baudrillard uses in relation to fetish in For a critique of the political economy of the sign (1981, p. 90).

7 See also: “Cheerleader fatally stabbed by boyfriend”, 2007; “Couple accused of killing cheerleader”, 2008; “Cheerleader Murder Lands In Court 2 Years Later”, 2008; et al.

8 An example is “IPL-2: Cheerleaders to add glamour quotient” (Ghose, 2009). It is also worth noting the argument of British journalist Rachel Johnson who writes that the “beauty quotient” of female journalistic subjects is one of the informal rules governing whether and how women appear in news photographs in UK news culture (2001).

9 John Hartley and Ellie Rennie argue that this phenomenon stems from the Reformation and “is still manifest in the modern dedication to truth in its written form” (2004, p. 459).

10 Antilocution – often used interchangeably with “hate speech” – refers to verbal rejection and is the first stage in a five-step intensity scale measuring the manifestation of prejudice devised by Gordon Allport in the 1950s (2000, p. 39).

11 See: O’Connor, 2004; Markovits, 2007; Ceaser, 2003; Rubin & Rubin, 2004; Revel, 2003; et al.

12 O’Connor’s quote is in reference to anti-Americanism.

13 In this context I am separating cheerleading-directed vitriol such as Beckerman’s from critiques in which the claims are more modest and supported by evidence (such as a Time magazine argument that cheerleading is dangerous because it is under-regulated [Kingsbury, 2008]).

14 “Economic anthropologist” James G. Carrier, who defines fungible as “capable of replacing or being replace by another item meeting the requisite definition”, notes that both objects and people can acquire this status in commodity relationships (1995, p. 28-29).

15 American communications scholar Sarah Banet-Weiser uses this phrase in relation to the Miss America beauty pageant, although her focus extends to race and nationalism in addition to gender (1999, p. 30).

16 This is poststructuralist feminist philosopher Sandra Lee Bartky’s definition of sexual objectification (1990, p. 26).

17 See the work of American psychologists Barbara L. Fredrickson and Tomi-Ann Roberts on the mental health risks linked to the individual self-objectification which often follows cultural practices of social objectification (1997).

18 UK sociologist John Thompson notes that, “in a world where symbolic capital is a scarce and valuable resource, reputation really does matter” and can “spread beyond the lives of the individuals concerned, weakening or even undermining the institutions or policies with which they are or have been linked” (1997, p. 57).

19 My research supports the findings of US women’s sports researchers Jean O’ Reilly and
Susan K. Cahn who argue that an “absence of information and accurate representation can influence athletic experience” (2007, p. 264). In relation to women’s boxing, they note that the media often treats: “women’s events as a spectacle, freak show, or sidelight to the main event rather than a legitimate activity. When matches are sold to the public as spectacle rather than as evenly matched competitions, boxers do not always receive adequate preparation… The media, then, not only report the news but shape the culture of sport, influencing the news they then report” (ibid).

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3, pp. 151 – 165.


The Mythic Element of Mass Media and Its Relation to Plato’s Cave

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Abstract: This paper compares some influential critiques of mass media and the mythic element they diagnose within it. Each theory is compared to the myth of the cave, described by Plato in his Republic, which suggests that whatever the format of our sociocultural communications systems, they falsely maintain a paradigm we assume equates with some kind of abiding truth or reality. This relatively ‘illusory’ quality must be qualified, however, by the transformative power and potential of mass media both as a paradigm and as a vehicle of cultural change. This tension is discussed in regards to Marshall McLuhan’s thesis that The Medium is the Message, the Frankfurt School analysis performed by Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer in the ‘Culture Industry’ chapter of their Dialectic of Enlightenment, and in Karl Marx’s theory of the commodity fetish as revised by Jean Baudrillard (in For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign) and Slavoj Žižek (in The Sublime Object of Ideology). Close readings of these influential critical analyses of the cultural and symbolic elements in the proliferation of mass media and communications industries today reveal an age-old tension between ignorance and knowledge, illusion and truth that is far from settled. My conclusion considers the degree of agency we, as consumers of mass media in the early twenty-first century, might enjoy in terms of its dominant message. It assumes that a Marxist critique of the media and communications industries remains relevant in the twenty-first century.

Introduction

How could we define the mythic element of the globalised mass media and communications industries of the early twenty-first century? Further, what does the attempt to answer this question offer to a critical study of the field? In responding to such questions, this paper considers one aspect of the way the literary and philosophical discourse surrounding it has considered the ‘mass media’ as a hegemonic monolith with its own terms of dissemination and perpetuation. The critiques I discuss here all investigate the explosion of information technologies in terms I would call ‘mythic,’ because they utilise metaphor to explain a force greater than that which is apparently under human control (especially when rational argument...
seemingly cannot encompass the subject matter). Each considers the new information age to have varying degrees of utopian and/or dystopian aspects and all can be further elucidated with reference to an ancient myth of the cave, used by Plato in his Republic, which is designed to explain the way humans live in unassuming ignorance of an almost all-abiding illusion. The degree to which we enjoy power over this force, or agency within its pervasive field, will be the subject of my conclusion.

I begin with Marshall McLuhan’s thesis that ‘the medium is the message,’ an idea that interprets a new electronic age as the bearer of its own mythic portent. The message that we have shifted out of a previous reliance on print media and its logic of linear development to a realm in which information is available across a broad range of shifting levels, amongst which we choose and manoeuvre, is extended across the ‘global village.’ This multiform message links a retribalised world with almost unmanageable reams of information, but by becoming ‘masters of cultural and historical alchemy’ through the study of media as a mythic language with its own grammar and syntax, we can accept ‘the direction and control of media old and new’ (McLuhan, 2005, p. 19). Against this utopian visage, which McLuhan qualified in later work, is pitted the unrelentingly bleak vision of Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer’s ‘Culture Industry,’ which is a monolithic monster that crushes all opposition to its relentless drive to corner markets and produce greater profits. For these Frankfurt School theorists, the information age merely extends the dominion traditionally sought on behalf of the corporate elite, from the colonisation of new lands to the infiltration of people’s minds. If their logic is accepted without question, however, the actual site where resistance to this new form of cultural fascism might take place becomes difficult to discern. As such, in many ways, their version of the mass media begs capitulation to its powers (or retreat into high modernist, avant garde aesthetics).

Alongside these two options and germane to both is the Marxian concept of the commodity fetish. This theory outlines the way cultural products have imprinted upon them an illusory sense of transcendence, a mystique of the idol that draws their consumer into a desacralised relationship redolent of worship. Two recent thinkers have commented at length on this idea; one, Jean Baudrillard, considers the way the commodity fetish has been extended through mass media to become a monster that flattens all opposition with its perpetual appetite, while the other, Slavoj Žižek, recognises the continual conflict involved in any such agenda, concluding that while the mass media may indeed resemble a monstrous entity that can devour the souls of humans, it can still also provide the tools for its own transformation. All of these ideas can be considered, in conclusion, as different outcomes of the myth of Plato’s cave. Does the prisoner held shackled in a world of illusions escape to see the light of truth – and what could such broadly defined ideas mean in terms of our engagement with globalised mass media in the early twenty-first century?

**Plato’s Cave and Its Relation to Postmodern Mass Media**

In his myth of the cave, Plato relates the story of prisoners who are kept shackled, facing in one direction only, while a series of images dances on the wall before them. With no alternative reality to compare to the shadows, which are produced by puppeteers holding images up to a firelight emanating from behind them, the prisoners take their situation for an abiding reality. For Plato in the Republic, we are those prisoners, the moving images are produced by our senses, the world is the cave and it is likewise confusing to the extent that it seems to our perceptions to be real. The rare prisoner who escapes the cave of corporeal life, however, comes to realise that there is a far truer reality outside of this one and that the truth found there is of a lasting nature that can be guaranteed with recourse to the eternal (as opposed to this changeable world). For Plato the path to this greater truth follows reason, which purifies the confused senses and
dismantles our submission to convention (which is unquestioningly accepted by the prisoners in a similar way that people are imprisoned within their seeming reality in the film The Matrix).

A reading of the cave myth in terms of postmodern mass media could begin with the recognition that the information age floods our senses with endless imagery that we cannot avoid. The narrative has metamorphosed, however; the ‘deceiving’ actors relaying confusing information, for instance, no longer represent just our perceptual apparatus and reliance on convention but a corporate-sponsored, globalising, capitalist regime. With this in mind, John O’Neill takes the perspective that Plato’s cave can still be used as a direct parallel to ‘the mass age of television’ (1991, p. 4). Just as our sensory nature tends towards acceptance of a conventional worldview, then, these new ‘actors’ on the stage of truth would likewise, on behalf of the profit motive, prefer that we remain in front of a wall of imagery, which is now the ever shifting face of the billboard, computer screen, television set, mobile phone, bus stop, building hoardings, and so on ad nauseum. Also, for Plato, escapees from the cave receive special training designed to introduce them to the eternal truths beyond the common assumptions of the prisoners. These ‘philosopher-kings’ then return (against their will now that they are enlightened and find the gloomy strictures of the cave all-too-human) to lead the herd of followers, but without necessarily offering them recourse to the difficult truth, which the prisoners would no doubt deny anyway. While we could not call the leaders of postmodern mass media philosopher-kings, and while they do not suffer from having to lead the unenlightened but rather profit from the blanket of media they ensconce consumers within, today’s directors of the imagery within the cave do share the assumptions of dominance accepted by Plato’s necessarily cynical elite. For the metaphor to survive transplant from Plato’s context to this one, then, the prisoners remain the public but the source of their shadowy imagery becomes the profit motive driving so much twenty-first century mass media. These ‘projectionists’ are heavily invested in retaining the mass media’s power over the consumers’ attention. A new hierarchy becomes prevalent, then, wherein a minority of the ‘prisoners’ of this world comes to recognise that control of the dominant format of imagery renders them a portion of political and economical freedom over the rest of the horde, while unquestioning acceptance of the imagery most dominant in twenty-first century mass media is the province of the most shackled and lowly of the prisoners. Thus critical analysis of mass media and/or a general level of education in the field may be seen as a stepping-stone towards loosening the power of profit to drive the dominant sociocultural imagery of our times.

The Medium is the Message and the Ship of Humanity

Marshall McLuhan’s thesis in The Medium is the Message treats the advent of mass media, especially in the sense that it proliferates electronically, as a shift in the entire consciousness – and therefore in the mythic history – of the humanity influenced by it. Although he later modified the extremeness of his position, earlier statements sometimes read as if we have entered a new utopia where all of humanity, once it has thrown off the shackles of print media and the linear trajectory of awareness associated with it, enjoys the same ‘ship of state.’ Such an attitude ignores the ignoble perspectives of the captains of industry McLuhan himself seems to have respected so much (Fawcett, 2004, pp. 218-219). But beyond his naïvety pertaining to the capitalist regime of profit motive and the territorialism of today’s retribalisation of the global village, McLuhan’s ideas retain some of their force, because he was prepared to consider the advent of twentieth-century mass media in the bigger picture of western history and the long arc of its communicative technologies. As McLuhan scholar Lance Strate points out, in order to study media as media (or to practise ‘media ecology’), ‘we need to use our powers of observation to reveal our otherwise invisible media environments … [and] make meaning
out of our media environments and their effects’ (Strate, 2008, p. 129). In other words, as Neil Postman has explained, ‘cultures are formed within media, rather than media simply being produced by cultures’.1

The twentieth century shift from a society built around and dependent upon mechanical technology to one immersed in electronic informational media is accompanied, then, by a shift in the way consciousness, and society itself, is shaped. The fragmenting process encouraged by alphabet, and then print technologies, is overwhelmed by a flood of new information delivered on multiple levels, such that the modern youth ‘lives mythically and in depth’ (McLuhan and Fiore, 2001, pp. 8-9). These new media, far from being a mere vehicle of the real happenings of contemporary life, contain and deploy the very force of this complete revolution, which in many ways takes us back into a culture of the Word. This amorphic space challenges the visually rationalised order of European print media culture, which heretofore made space ‘uniform, continuous, and connected’ as a line of ‘fragmented bits’ of information (pp. 44–45). For McLuhan, the main front in this civil war between old and new technologies was the television, which conditions its consumers to receive messages aurally as well as visually, engaging them in a complex interplay directly influenced by the smash and grab attention-gathering techniques of advertising, with scant time spent on narrative form (pp. 125–26). While now dated in terms of the technologies involved – the digital and Internet revolutions would surely be seen as the front line today – McLuhan’s idea that the new acoustic space envelops us in a ‘seamless web’ of ‘simultaneous relationships’ (p. 111), conveying a return to the totalisation of mythic consciousness, beyond ‘detached patterns’ and towards a new participation mystique (p. 114), retains some intellectual cache in terms of this paper. His recognition that the ‘contained, the distinct, the separate—our Western legacy—…. [is] being replaced by the flowing, the unified, the fused’ speaks eloquently to the postmodern experience of the digital age (p. 145).

McLuhan’s suggestions as to how this shift could best be negotiated arise out of the way he defines mythic aurality against the phonetically organised (visual) universe: ‘Speech is a social chart of th[e] bog’ of acoustic space, the boundless directionlessness that was abolished by the invention of writing in the city’ (p. 48). The multidimensional space enjoyed by pre-alphabetic societies is recreated with electric circuitry (pp. 56–57). The way today’s consumer is plugged into a variety of electronic media in a constant stream of information, often from many directions at once, bears out the prescience of this aspect of McLuhan’s analysis (although a postcolonial reading would surely abhor his passive acceptance of civilisation’s colonising power over other societies). He averred that this new mythic realm offers the challenge of retaining the abstract, speculative reasoning of the Socratic dialogue (pp. 113–14) while letting go of visually-enhanced illusions of order. Two literary metaphors suggest to him similar strategic procedures. We might choose to follow Joyce into *Finnegans Wake* and the ancient ‘means of living simultaneously in all cultural modes while quite conscious’ (pp. 119–20). Or, alternatively, but with a parallel nod towards the dissolution of known order, we can accompany Poe and his delirious speculations on the nature of the whirlpool into which he descended: ‘In his amusement born of rational detachment of his own situation, Poe’s mariner in “The Descent into the Maelstrom” staved off disaster by understanding the action of the whirlpool. His insight offers a possible stratagem for understanding our predicament, our electronically-configured whirl’ (p. 150). Our drift into the global village, if it is to avoid the tragic possibilities inherent in the ‘bog’ of aural/mythic society, must seek to overcome ignorance of the media culture that helps to shape it. Interestingly, in these times of renewed apocalyptic speculation, the maelstrom is an ancient symbol for the end of the world (De Santillana and von Dechend, 2005, p. 214).

Much of the language found in his famous book can be found rehearsed in earlier publications. In ‘Myth and Mass Media,’ McLuhan is akin with the Roland Barthes of *Mythologies,* - 75 -
relating the myth-making process associated with Hollywood and Madison Avenue as a kind of social telescoping, distilling ‘in a single image the total social action or process that is imagined as desirable’. Usefully, McLuhan’s utopianism makes him question the ‘prevalent concept that the mass media exert[s] a baneful influence on the human spirit’ (McLuhan, 1959, p. 17). But the associated idea that the newspaper offers ‘unprocessed, uninterpreted, raw news’ (p. 18) for readers who must then piece items together to make their own meaning out of life clearly underestimated the power of today’s broadcast/print frenzy of cross-promotion, a phenomenon of global sponsorship so deeply ingrained in the production of early twenty-first century cultural artefacts as to be ubiquitous. The newspaper editorial itself may endeavour to provide objectivity, but the content of mass media is programmed to a fine degree regarding the overall narrative the consumer is expected to take from it; the message is not just fixed on continued consumption, but on attention being pointed in very certain directions depending on the media sponsors involved.

Baudrillard’s less salutary vision, discussed below, retains more traction in terms of the way postmodern mass media operates to flatten all to which it refers into a single, amorphous dimension of consumability. To accept McLuhan’s electronic myth, as I have mentioned, we would need to assume a sense of collectivity in human affairs and society that could be termed a ‘ship of humanity’ myth. As Brian Fawcett notes, although we can’t blame McLuhan for not seeing the future, we can say that ‘the recent evolution of mass systems, particularly those related to communications … seem to be increasingly shaped by and driven for financial profit,’ and run by corporations single-minded enough in their drive towards this goal that the advance of critical awareness in its customer base – which is all of us – is hardly a tacit goal, to say the least (Fawcett, 2004, p. 208).

While part of McLuhan’s thesis is clearly misguided in its naïve optimism, it just as clearly maintains for the individual consumer of this modern phenomenon – again, that is all of us subsumed within the new world of western technology and/or global market advertising – an aspect of agency. As McLuhan commented in The Medium is the Message, ‘there is absolutely no inevitability as long as there is a willingness to contemplate what is happening’ (p. 25). The prisoner in McLuhan’s cave, that is to say, is no longer shackled such that they must face the same wall at all times. They can get up, move about, choose different walls to look at; interact with, make a request to, or even become the projectionists. For McLuhan, there is no greater truth available outside the cave, as if we were locked into Plato’s realm of shadowy illusion while the sun of true intelligibility shone elsewhere; ‘we cannot escape into a higher metaphysics or into an elite culture’ (O’Neill, 1991, p. 7). As Strate puts it, the cave represents the entirety of reality and it is the media utilised by the projectionists that matters, more than the shadows they project:

McLuhan’s goal was the liberation of the human mind and spirit from its subjugation to symbol systems, media, and technologies. This can only begin with a call to pay attention to the medium, because it is the medium that has the greatest impact on human affairs, not the specific messages we send or receive. It is the symbolic form that is most significant, not the content (Strate, 2008, p. 130).

The cave is thus the world and different levels of truth illuminate it; no eternal metaphysic, like Plato’s sun, stands guarantor outside the system. This kind of perspective accords favourably with the always-contextualising historicism of the postmodern outlook and it also allows for the individual agency required for any comprehensively critical position on modern mass media. But McLuhan’s position also conveys a theoretical weakness in regards to the power dynamic.
involved in what Fredric Jameson calls ‘the cultural logic of late capitalism.’ For Jameson, the postmodern celebrates ‘a prodigious exhilaration with the new order of things, a commodity rush’ that erases history and nature in a process of sheer consumption (Jameson, 1991, p. x). It represses its own history (and tendency towards cultural fascism) beneath the logic of the shopping mall (p. xi) and draws all into its vertiginous lure (theorisation of which requires ‘a whole new media-lexicological subdiscipline’, p. xiii). If the seemingly irresistible spread of the profit motive across postmodern mass media requires some form of active resistance, as opposed to disinterested observation of its maelstrom-like qualities, this qualification to a theory like McLuhan’s requires ongoing attention.

**Adorno and Horkheimer’s Culture Industry - A Downward-Spiralling Dialectic**

Jameson’s work, in many ways, is an updated version of Adorno and Horkheimer’s critique of the Culture Industry, which in their enormously influential *Dialectic of Enlightenment* diagnoses a kind of mass trance in consumer society. Their subtitle – ‘Enlightenment as Mass Deception’ – stakes out the territory of their investigation: to what extent is the combined platform of media and culture targeted by captains of industry with little care other than for the profits that motivate them? Their answer is damning and comprehensive. The Culture Industry is a mechanical monster, one-dimensionally unanimous in its subjugation of the individual in the same kind of master/slave relationship as civilisation assumes over nature (Adorno & Horkheimer, 2002, p. 94). Art is business in a society split by elitist domination and dedicated to the ascendancy of those with the strongest economic position.

The familiar Frankfurt School combination of Marxist and Freudian analysis is explicit: alongside this critique of capital is found the psychological mode of enculturation in the individual, who internalises the repressive code as their own superego, or personal control (p. 95). The monolithic omnipotence of capital thus stamps its constituent consumers with ‘the power of their true master’ (p. 98); art forms such as film are industrialised to suit exactly the same mechanical rhythm and routine as the workplace (p. 104), so that the authority of capitalist ideology is accepted even as we seek escape from it (p. 109). The ubiquitous love of novelty inherent in late capitalism is thus set in a framework of ‘unending sameness’; change is ultimately and completely conservative within this dominant paradigm (p. 106). With so many heretofore ‘irreconcilable elements of culture’ subjected equally under a ‘single false denominator’, the capitalist culture industry resembles no less than a mythic system of totalisation (p. 108). Just as the global logic of capital does, the ‘culture industry cheats its consumers out of what it endlessly promises’ (p. 111). And like the transcendence held out as attainable yet distant by a religious complex, the principle of the culture industry never releases its grip on the consumer. Finally, the individual is tolerated only as they identify with the universal quality of capital (p. 124), which remorselessly mocks the land of eternal feasting (or milk and honey, p.126) that I suggest has long been the dream of the west.

However, according to Saladdin Said Ahmed, the Culture Industry ‘does not have a specific agenda to stupidize the mass individual; rather, it invests in the mass individual’s fetishistic attitude towards commodities’ (Ahmed, 2008, p. 80). ‘Mass culture’ is therefore the realm where individuals come together under a fascistic ‘regime of totems and fetishism’ (p. 89). Regardless of which direction this stream flows in, the result is a flattening out of quality and diversity into the lowest common (commodifiable) denominator. The psychological terms of the collective trance state, as it is manifest on behalf of the capitalist profit motive, are considered by semiotician Cosimo Caputo, for whom the commodity venerated in the culture industry and its media acts as an idol (Caputo, 2001). He defines this idol as a fetish that ‘captures the gaze ... [and] dazzles it’, unlike the genuine sacramental icon, which instead ‘provokes the gaze,
invites it not to stop, but to look about’ (p. 238). This can be seen at work in idolised Hollywood fame or brightly lit consumer products at the local supermarket, where our obsession with the ‘ever-new’ is titillated but never fulfilled (p. 238). Psychic colonisation triumphs with ‘a kind of gelatinous doctrine that insensibly envelops all rebellious reasoning, inhibits it, confounds it, paralyses it until it is suffocated … [so that] it is not an exaggeration to speak of modern dogmatism’ (pp. 235–36).

In another recent update of the dogmatic power of commodification, it is pointed out that although the ‘Global Culture Industry’ now markets design-intensive indeterminacy and difference rather than labour-intensive identity, the economic imperative remains exactly the same: the ‘way in which capital successfully accumulates’ (Lash & Fury, 2007, p. 5). While the commodity still effaces its history in order to parade an aura of mystique, however, the brand values its unique qualities as a way of being easily relatable to the consumer who desires association with them (p. 6). ‘Yet the brand’s cosmology of difference and invention,’ Scott Lash and Celia Fury continue, ‘is at the same time the source of a reassembled system of domination. Global culture industry’s emergent regime of power results in inequalities, disparities and deception rarely encountered in Horkheimer and Adorno’s classical age’ (p. 7). Since ‘things’ were commodified they have become media, while media have become products themselves (p. 8). In the flux appears a new paradigm of ‘event-culture’ with its own metaphysic of the monad, where substance and image are folded into one dimension along with mind and matter (p. 15). This style of immanence is surely not liberation from the ancient dualism between dark worldliness and light transcendence, but a sinking into the maelstrom of such a mythic system’s collapse.

The prisoners in the world of the contemporary global culture industry, then, seem to have only been reshackled by the shift from commodity as thing to media as commodity-event; in Adorno and Horkheimer’s cave, we still remain facing the same wall as ever. Only the generation of elite directing the projection of images and the technology (both physical and psychological) utilised on behalf of the trance-inducing pageant change. The prisoners – those of us involved in the modern markets of culture and consumption and thereby complicit in civilisation’s subjugation of nature – are ruled not by philosopher-kings who have left the cave, seen the light and returned, but by profit-driven corporate capitalists more than willing to peddle deception. The Culture Industry employs mass media to instil their fascist regime of capitalist subjugation without remorse or compunction. The cave is sealed and the prisoners grist to the mill. There is no escape. This lack of transformability in the monster of mass media is the shadow to McLuhan’s new mythic age; such critical theory might be stronger theoretically, as Strate admits, than media ecology, but the latter ‘is more open-ended and adaptable, and more concrete, less prone to the hardening of the categories, as McLuhan was wont to say’ (Strate, 2008, p. 134). While a necessary antidote to theoretical weakness in terms of resistance to the dominant paradigm, Adorno and Horkheimer’s critique lacks the vital component of agency in the consumer, who for them is supposedly shaped so markedly by the ‘message’ of mass media that they can no longer offer resistance to the profit motive that compels its product.

**Marx’s Commodity Fetish, Baudrillard and Žižek’s Monster**

Karl Marx pointed out, in his *Capital*, that there is a certain magical element to the commodity, which is built in to the way it is produced and presented to the consumer. His point stands, as far as I can tell, whether one considers the cultural artefact they consume to be a material item purchased at the mall or an item of communication we listen to, watch, read, or ingest without even being aware of it. For Marx, this operation proceeds according to the idea that a commodity attains a religious, mystical or transcendental dimension due to the extra value
over and above its material, or use, value) ascribed it during the process of its production and exchange (Marx, 1970). This socially mediated process is obfuscated in direct proportion to the complexity of the division of labour inherent in its production. ‘Primitive’ societies enjoy ‘extremely simple and transparent’ relations amongst themselves, their products and ‘Nature,’ which they revere (Marx, 1970, p. 79). Development of this ‘narrowness’ is desirable (in spite of its being inherently deceptive) until a society’s material production is ‘consciously regulated’ by ‘freely associated men … in accordance with a settled plan’ and over a ‘long and painful process of development’ (p. 80). This would be the communist dream made possible with the coming into and passing out of being of the capitalist mode, which in turn has transformed the means and power of production originally released by the industrial revolution.

The use value of a material object, known according to its primitive condition, is translated into an exchange value according to social agreement. This exchange value remains independent of a commodity’s inherent use value and ‘obtains fixity’ according to a system of exchange that varies ‘continually, independently of the will, foresight and action of the producers’ (p. 75). The obfuscation attending this process combines worship with powerlessness – we fetishise a commodity to the extent that we are alienated from the conscious processes of its production. Thus capitalism continues the process of mystification historically conveyed by religion. Imagistically, it is as if the capitalist mode of production operates as a magician, covering over the conditions by which the commodity comes into being before pulling away the screen to reveal – the magical idol, upon which we are free to project our desires, our lack, the status and identity we crave with consumption, and so on.

Marx’s recognition of this trick offers hope to the humanist, but it also indicates the depth of capitalism’s shadow; today’s hyper-profane, materialistic postmodern commodity fetish continues to operate as the opiate of the masses, with damaging and ongoing sociocultural costs. The commodity leads this parade as its mystic icon (or idol), with an ahistorical origin, a mysterious authority and a hoped-for telos. Hence the modern consumer, as much as the traditional Christian, is convinced that they should accept a ‘nature’ emptied of cultural history, as Barthes would have it (Barthes, 1974, pp. 142–43). Marx’s concept of the commodity fetish is further developed in two influential commentaries, Baudrillard’s *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign* (1981) and Žižek’s *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (1992). Both attempt to correct Marx’s original thesis with reference to the driving force behind the fetishistic relationship of the modern consumer to commodities in general, and both grapple with the multifarious challenges facing any critical engagement with mass media towards the end of the twentieth century and beyond.

For Žižek, the open dialectic of confrontation between different ideologies of power continues, as our world of endless plurality continuously throws a spanner in the works of any composite vision of reality (whether politically or psychologically constructed). For Baudrillard, on the other hand, postmodern life grinds unceasingly towards the monological monster that haunts it from the shadows of its origins. The transformation of God, as guarantor of the sign’s meaning, operates solely on the level of His hyperreal weightlessness (Baudrillard, 1981, pp. 5–7). This secularised simulation of origin and authenticity is all light and air, like the ubiquitous flood of information in which meaning is dissolved (pp. 79–86). For Baudrillard, as for McLuhan, television was the frontline agent of this process that confuses the real, the model and the medium (pp. 28–29). It flattens all communication into a homogenous space-time that structures a newly totalised model of social relations best symbolised in the kind of directed anticipation redolent of the hypermarket (pp. 75–77).

Both Baudrillard and Žižek treat the commodity fetish as a Frankensteinean creation
we have unwittingly created and granted excessive power to. We are here located between the ‘ship of humanity’ and hierarchical models of society employed by McLuhan and Adorno and Horkheimer respectively. Consumer society feeds on the very monster it stitches together for its own benefit, such that the projectors in the cave could be any one of us in turn because we are all implicit in maintaining the illusion we live by. The slave, however, as in any good horror story, eventually becomes the master. For Baudrillard, the ideology of political economy, ‘the fundamental code of our societies’ (p. 147), is revealed as an impersonal monster which ‘simultaneously produces the content and the consciousness to receive it’, while remaining cunning enough ‘to veil itself continually in the evidence of content’ and the ‘obviousness of value’ (p. 145). The political economy we choose because it promises to improve our standards of living, that is to say, in turn shapes the very way we think so that we request more of the same; it becomes master, just as Frankenstein’s monster chases him down and rules his fate in the end.

This occurs, according to Baudrillard, because of a fundamental point missing in Marx’s theory of commodity fetish, which concerns the value consumers place on the commodity. Marx’s mistake, claims the French theorist, lies in assuming a kind of infrastructural (primitive, natural) ‘use’ value upon which the (developed, cultural) ‘exchange’ value is built, or elaborated. Baudrillard’s own analysis rests upon a revised definition of ideology, according to which the ‘use’ value of the immanent commodity and the ‘exchange’ value of its transcendental sign are produced together, along with the kind of individual who will consume them. The individual, then, shares a shape (or taste?) with the ‘peculiar magic’ of this all-pervasive, ever-hungry phenomenon: ‘Ideology seizes all production, material or symbolic, in the same process of abstraction, reduction, general equivalence and exploitation’ (p. 146). The ‘code’ controls meaning as it ‘rationalizes and regulates exchange [and] makes things communicate’ (p. 147). We are tracking not something that binds society together with rationalised mystifications (or ‘coherent’ belief systems) pointing hazily towards some mythic reality, but rather a structurating force (like myth for Lévi-Strauss) that socialises, informs and, in fact, produces the individual of contemporary consumer society according to a general, abstract system of exchange (p. 147). As commentator Charles Levin notes, Baudrillard reverses Marx’s narrative of commodity fetishism, so that exchange value is not ‘a mere by-product of complexity,’ but is the inspiration ‘that induces the logic of utility and mobilizes the psychology of needs in order to perpetuate itself’ (Levin, 1981, p. 18). Consumption (rather than production) drives the system to invent new needs, and the consumer acts as a kind of bricoleur desperately attempting to organise their ‘privatised existence and invest it with meaning’ (p. 5).

Comparatively, in _The Sublime Object of Ideology_, Žižek revises Hegelian dialectics in the light of Freud, so that, rather than seeking an ever-progressive overcoming of endless antagonism, we recognise that all knowledge ‘finally accepts “contradiction” as an internal condition of every identity’ (Žižek, 1992, p. 7). Hence the colonising monster of ‘absolute knowledge’ is reframed as ‘nothing but a name for the acknowledgment of a certain radical loss’. The Lacanian philosophy of lack drives egoistic consciousness, the ‘Other Scene external to the thought whereby the form of the thought is already articulated in advance’ (p. 19). It is in this sense that Alfred Sohn-Rethel claimed our reality is ‘already “staged”’ outside of the field of conventional consciousness (of either everyday or philosophical pedigrees). Thus ‘false consciousness’ is implied by the very nature of an ideological framework according to which participants cannot know exactly what they are doing or what the essence of their object of fascination really is (p. 21). The mystical transformation of the commodity operates according to similar operational procedures as the Freudian dream-work, both attaining an alluring form thanks to a process whereby frustrated desire is charged with deeper meaning. Labour power may have been discovered as the secret that transforms the object from use to exchange value,
for Marx, but ‘the process by means of which the hidden meaning disguised itself in such a form’ remains obfuscated (p. 15). We are in the realm of the ephemeral nature of the satisfactions offered by materialistic consumption: we cannot possibly gratify our desires because they are perpetually regenerated from beyond the sphere of consciousness (and in fact actively construct the form of that consciousness). The monster in its shadows haunts the commodity – as its ephemerally offered, yet ultimately ungraspable, promise of satisfaction – just as the latent content haunts the dream.

Like Baudrillard, then, Žižek claims for ideology a ‘structuring power’ over our social reality; it is not ‘an illusion masking the real state of things’ (p. 33), but an illusion (or ‘fetishistic inversion’) that grants things ‘embodiments of universal Value’ (p. 32). Although they (and the money that represents their value) are ‘in reality just an embodiment, a condensation, a materialization of a network of social relations’, we function in regards to them as if they embodied the spirit of wealth itself, its ‘immediate, natural property’ (p.31). Individuals recognise this but act as if they didn’t. The postmodern consumer therefore lives in a world of materialistic transcendence, or mystified commodity exchange, in which Marx’s reversal of Platonic Forms reveals another layer of mythic discourse beneath (or beyond) conventional consciousness. Both analyses have close familial links to Lévi-Strauss’s structural anthropology, in which myth forms the framework of the way people think. Not only is it inescapable, it is ineradicable, open to transformation but inherent as inherited. The cave is in fact structured according to a reality beyond that which we perceive in the imagery displayed before us on its walls; but that reality is not necessarily of the domain of higher truth, but deeper. It is not symbolised by a metaphysical light that sits behind the sun of sensorial or conventional truth but can be found with further investigation into the shadows within the cave. Thus there is still room for the escapee to leave the world of everyday assumption, to come to this realisation and to inhabit the projection room with a clearer vision of what constitutes the age of mass media and its imagery of truth and reality. Like the Virgilian hero in the epigraph to Freud’s Interpretation of Dreams, if we cannot bend the higher powers, we must move the infernal regions; for Žižek’s postmodern world, the secret truth to the commodity lies not in the metaphysical guarantor or its human representative the superego, but in the body, its desires and its id.

In terms of both Žižek’s Lacanian kernel and Baudrillard’s symbolic, these truths operate from behind such imagery and are excluded from the equation of conventional consciousness as they continue to haunt it from beneath. They can only be approached in metaphor because they act from across a horizon that never disappears but concomitantly cannot ‘be named except by allusion, by infraction’ (Baudrillard, p. 161). In our ultimate blindness to a Lacanian ‘symbolic real,’ then, the symbol conceals as well as reveals; it ‘attempts to mislead: it permits itself to appear as totality, to efface the traces of its abstract transcendence, and parades about as the reality principle of meaning’ (p. 162). But, as Charles Levin notes, this amounts to a different kind of deception from that allowed by traditional Marxian analysis. For Baudrillard, no ‘critique of political economy can go on believing that its truth lies simply in the recovery of an essence that capitalism hides and represses without actually destroying’ (Levin, p. 21). Baudrillard’s notion that we are thoroughly integrated in this ‘subterranean play of reification’ (p. 11) can then indicate hopeless immersion in illusion as much as it can point towards a less alienating existence in the ‘daylight’ realm of modern media.

According to the directives of this model of consumption, the commodity is now ‘immediately produced as a sign, as sign value, and … signs (culture) are produced as commodities’ (Baudrillard, p. 147). Naomi Klein points out how a metaphysic of branding feeds a kind of corporate transcendence that signifies a spiritual state, such as the romance of coffee, rather than a product (Klein, 2000, pp. 20-21). Baudrillard’s The System of Objects predates this insight by two
decades, by showing that we have always purchased the connotations of an object along with its physical features. It is the feeling we seek from the product or media, more than its physical use value, that creates the commodity fetish; but this feeling is as perpetually ephemeral as it is constitutive. For Baudrillard, culture itself is produced as (and reduced to) an endless variety of commodities and signs collapsed into each other under the weight of a system predicated upon simultaneous consumption of the abstract and material. It is therefore crucial to see that ‘the separation of the sign and the world is a fiction,’ and that ‘this world is quite simply the Signified-Referent … a single and compact thing, an identity of content that acts as the moving shadow of the Signifier’ (Baudrillard, p. 152). The sign and its referent operate according to the vicious circle they share with any metaphysical organisation; this ‘superior myth’ reciprocally illuminates both commodity and meaning in a gigantic simulation (pp. 150–61). We can see how Baudrillard’s musings on Marx’s commodity fetish led directly to his theorisation of the simulacra.

Žižek, however, shifts the argument away from the paralysing unity of Baudrillard’s simulacra and back to the everyday conflicts that mark the realities of political economy. Althusser’s reproach to Marx’s elementary formulation of commodity fetishism – that it ‘is based on a naïve, ideological, epistemologically unfounded opposition between persons (human subjects) and things’ – is reconsidered, with Lacanian insight into the way people and things are indeed opposed (Žižek, p. 33). While capitalist subjects mediate amongst one another ‘as rational utilitarians, guided only by their own selfish interests … all their beliefs, superstitions and metaphysical mystifications … are embodied in the “social relations between things”. They no longer believe, but the things themselves believe for them’ (p. 34). Ideology (like myth) structures reality, mediates opposites on behalf of making this reality culturally palatable, and hides behind the dream we know as our conventional world (pp. 45–47). Capitalism depends upon ‘the permanent revolutionizing of its own conditions of existence’ such that the kernel – ‘its own fundamental, constitutive imbalance, “contradiction”’ – perpetuates as a Hegelian absolute (p. 52). This form of economic organisation prescribes exponentially increasing consumption as the medicine that will eradicate, in an ephemeral haze of corporeal satisfaction, the timeless kernel of societal and ecological antagonism at its heart. The gigantic expenditure on capital works in Australia prescribed as the appropriate medicine for the illness that was (and continues to be) the global financial crisis begat in 2008 illustrates how this logic continues to enjoy widespread dominion. Today’s consumers inherit a system designed to eat its way through the earth: its ‘normal’ state is marked by the endless novelty of an unstoppable monster. Ephemeral satisfaction both initiates and sustains the addiction of production and consumption; but for Žižek, the ‘excessive power’ manifest as this frenetic activity reveals its own ‘fundamental impotence’ (p. 53).

Žižek’s cave reveals a struggle over the means of imagery production that stays truer to his Marxist roots than does Baudrillard; yet, a Lacanian kernel of ineradicable tension infects both systems of thought. In this sense, Freud’s Civilization and its Discontents would have to be seen as the master text to both theoretical schemas, neither of which can offer any real guidance to the prisoner except to shine a light on the root of their fundamental impotence. Whether or not this illumination can lead to some form of active agency in regards to our situation of prisoners in a cave presumably remains in our own hands.

**Conclusion**

This brief excursion across postmodern mass media has taken in a variety of critical analyses, each of which deals with a new age of electronic and digital communications as if it revealed a mythic element. Each of these analyses, which have gained a large measure of influence in
varied fields of cultural critique over recent decades, have been placed in the perspective of Plato’s ancient vision of illusory knowledge and emancipation into a difficult truth, as outlined in his cave myth. The paper asked: what is beyond our immediate interaction with the content of modern mass media that could reveal something underlying, or even mythic, in regards to its form?

McLuhan’s vision of a global village assumed a collectivity directly negated by the desire of capitalist profiteering, which has no stake in reducing the trance-like nature of consumerism peddled as the ‘message’ of much of the ‘medium.’ Yet his ideas maintained a place for each individual consumer, who could exercise their power within this transformative regime to choose amongst the endless raft of possible bits and sources of information. Twyla Gibson notes that McLuhan remains important for the way he draws ‘attention to media as communication’ and underlines ‘the need for different kinds of media and information literacy’ if we are ‘to understand how changes in communication technology impact language, culture, and society’ (Gibson, 2008, p. 164).

Such a playing field of possibility stands in stark contrast to Adorno and Horkheimer’s critique of the Culture Industry, which infiltrates the very psyche of every consumer within its considerable reach, to extend the colonisation that was begun with civilization and its building of empire. Baudrillard and Žižek, meanwhile, adapt Marx’s theory of the commodity fetish to fit the new lingua franca, both claiming that modern mass media acts as an uncontrollable monster that escapes any containment we might desire for it not only because of mass media’s power to colonise regardless of cultural context but, more deeply, because it shapes the very psyche it appeals to. It does this, both theorists agree, by acting as a representation offering to fill the lack that inspires the human ego into action. Our very identities, then, are called forth to communicate within the realm of impersonal desire and ephemeral satisfaction, an endless cycle only strengthened by the participation of every consumer within its grasp. To differing degrees, each sees a monster in place of a consciously mediated system of communication. Whether it can be transformed according to the agency of the consumer collective partly depends on who controls its reigns; in the hands of a corporate elite whose identity shifts but whose agenda remains the same, the monster of mass media grows until it suffocates all resistance. Alternatively, the proliferation of media forms into alternative ‘messages,’ if it can resist the crushing weight and ‘swallowing’ action of commodification, may paradoxically unite a significant enough critical mass of alternative visions of ‘truth’ and ‘reality’ to counter the monolithic flattening of cultural capital into its lowest common denominator.

If the metaphor of Plato’s cave has any relevance to this situation, as I believe it still does, it is because many consumers of twenty-first century mass media believe that the raft of images flashing consistently on the walls of our world sells one message above, beyond, or beneath all others: do anything you like, as long as you continue to consume. If we are inevitably prisoners in some way to the fact that we can have only limited (and therefore, in some sense, illusory) awareness of any abiding truth in our vision of reality, how then do we navigate the world beyond this dominant paradigm? While it is beyond the scope of this paper to suggest possible answers to this question, it is hoped that some leverage may have been gained in recognising the imagery employed by significant commentators on the advent of mass media and the information age, especially in terms of its mythic content. Gaining even limited agency in terms of such theoretical schemas seems to me a reasonable step in our interaction with a phenomenon so pervasive as to be mythic in its own right. If this is the case, then, as the commentators I have discussed here each in their own way suggest, we are dealing with the way in which the very psyche of the twenty-first century individual, as consumer, is constituted. Transformation of this situation in terms beneficial to each of us should be regarded as a matter of educational
imperative, for purposes of social justice as well as personal gratification.

**Endnotes**

3. Brian Fawcett (2004, pp. 239-240) outlines the way corporate sponsors design television around the desires of corporate sponsors. The transparency of cross-promotion between television, music, print and the industries they can be utilised to represent is an accepted feature of postmodern culture.
5. Slavoj Žižek (1992, p. 7). Žižek’s Lacanian rescue of Hegel rereads classical motifs such as commodity fetishism according to an approach that promises to critically analyse ‘contemporary ideological phenomena … without falling prey to any kind of “post-modernist” traps (such as the illusion that we live in a “post-ideological” condition)’ (p. 7).
7. “This inversion through which what is sensible and concrete counts only as a phenomenal form of what is abstract and universal, contrary to the real state of things where the abstract and the universal count only as a property of the concrete – such an inversion is characteristic of the expression of value’ (Marx, 1970, p. 32).

**References**


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